

READING AND REFLECTION

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Adoption in Christ

PART I. - UNDERSTANDING OUR ADOPTION

A. The importance of adoption

“The notion that we are children of God, His own sons and daughters... is the mainspring of Christian living... Our sonship to God is the apex of Creation and the goal of redemption.”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

“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. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all. [Adoption] is the highest privilege the gospel offers... I have heard it seriously argued that the thought of divine fatherhood can mean nothing to those whose human father was inadequate, lacking wisdom, affection or both, nor to those many more whose misfortune it was to have a fatherless upbringing... But this is silly. For it is just not true to suggest that in the realm of personal relations, positive concepts cannot be formed by contrast... The truth is that all of us have a positive ideal of fatherhood by which we judge our own and others’ fathers [how else could we be unhappy with our bad fathers?], and it can safely be said that the person for whom the thought of God’s perfect fatherhood is meaningless or repellant does not exist.”

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

B. Objections to and distortions of adoption

“The idea that all are children of God is not found in the Bible anywhere... The gift of sonship to God becomes ours not through being born, but through being born again. ‘To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or of a husband’s will, but born of God.’ (Jn.1:12-13) Sonship to God, then, is a gift of grace. It is not a natural but an adoptive sonship, and so the New Testament explicitly pictures it.”

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

C. Adoption defined

“Adoption is not a change in nature, but a change in status. If we fail to see this truth, we will reject the power of our adoption... Adoption is a declaration God makes about us. It is irreversible, dependent entirely upon His gracious choice, in which He says: ‘You are my son, today I have brought you into my family.’”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

“The profound truth of Roman adoption was that the adoptee was taken out of his previous state and placed in a new relationship of son to his new father... All his old debts are cancelled, and in effect the adoptee started a new life as part of his new family... [On the one hand, the new father] owned all the [new offspring’s] property, controlled his personal relationships, and had the rights of discipline. On the other hand, the father was liable for the actions of the adoptee, and each owed the other reciprocal duties of support and maintenance.”

– Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, and Sons*

D. Biblical theology of adoption

“God and religion are not less than they were; the Old Testament revelation of the holiness of God, and its demand for humility in man, is presupposed throughout, but something has been added. A new factor has come in. New Testament believers deal with God as their Father.”

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

“According to our Lord’s own testimony in John’s Gospel, God’s fatherly relation to him implied four things.

- First, fatherhood implied authority. The Father commands and disposes; the initiative which he calls his Son to exercise is the initiative of resolute obedience to his Father’s will... (6:38; 17:4; 5:19; 4:34).
- Second, fatherhood implied affection. ‘The Father loves the Son.’ ‘The Father hath loved me...’ (5:20; 15:9-10). [3]
- Third, fatherhood implied fellowship. ‘I am not alone, for my Father is with me’ ‘The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone...’ (16:32; 8:29).
- Fourth, fatherhood implied honor. God wills to exalt his Son. ‘Father... Glorify your Son.’ ‘The Father... has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son...’ (17:1; 5:22-23).

All this extends to his adopted children. In, through, and under Jesus Christ their Lord, they are ruled, loved, companied, and honored by their heavenly Father... “‘Father... let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am...’ (17:23-24).

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Chapter 19

PART II – EXPERIENCING OUR ADOPTION

A. The status Christians have

“God sent his son... to redeem those under the law that we might receive the adoption [lit. the sonship].” Galatians 4:4-5

B. The experience Christians can have

“Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Galatians 4:6

“You did not receive the spirit of slavery again to fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God.” Romans 8:15-16

C. What is the experience of sonship?

“[We all have a native] inability to believe that salvation is entirely of God's grace and love... We are slow to realize the implications of that. We are sons, but we are in danger of having the mindset of hired servants. Furthermore, if there is nothing else the Devil can do to mar our joy in Christ, he will try to produce in us what our forefathers used to call a ‘bondage frame of spirit.’... That is why he sends us the Spirit of adoption. What is [that]? Paul says,

‘You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father’ (Rom.8:15-16)

...Paul is referring to the Holy Spirit... [which] brings us into a deep-seated persuasion that we really are the sons of God. If it is a fact that... God has adopted us into his family, then the Spirit assures us this is true, and enables us to live in the enjoyment of such a rich spiritual blessing... He sends his Spirit into our hearts, bringing us the deep spiritual and psychological security that rests on the objective fact that our sins are forgiven and we belong to the Lord.”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

“ ‘Abba’ was the word that was used familiarly by children talking to their fathers... A child does not always address his father as ‘father;’ he uses terms such as ‘Papa,’ ‘Dad.’ That is the kind of meaning represented by this word ‘Abba.’ It was a... word lisped by a little child... But let us notice the word ‘cry’... we **cry** ‘Abba, Father.’ It is a very strong word, and clearly the Apostle has used it quite deliberately. It means a loud cry... it expresses deep emotion... What then does it imply? Obviously... real knowledge of God. God is no longer to us a distant God. He is not merely a God in whom we believe intellectually, theologically, theoretically, doctrinally only. All this is possible to one who is not a child of God at all... [Our]

worship and praying are spontaneous; it is the spontaneity of the child who sees the father... and not only spontaneity, but confidence. A little child has confidence. He does not analyze it... he **knows** that 'Abba' is his father. Grown-ups may be standing back at a distance and being very formal [with some great personage]; but the little child comes running in, rushes right in, and holds on to his father's legs. He has a right that no-one else has... It is instinctive... we **cry** 'Abba, Father.'"

– D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 8:5-17*

D. An example of the experience ("spirit") of sonship

The problem: "Because I did not believe God loved me on the basis of Christ's life, death, and resurrection –

The result: [therefore] I could not face the risk of seeing my sins as my own responsibility. So having tried to clear my conscience by blaming others, I turned on the afterburners and made myself busy with work and duty. Or to use Luther's analogy, I was full of active righteousness. I looked to my outward activity to feel good about myself, and judged others by my own active standards...

The turning: But now I understood what Luther was talking about: 'In the righteousness of faith we work nothing, we render nothing to God, but we only receive and allow another to work in us.' This is what he called a "passive righteousness" — a righteousness that is credited to our account through faith. This was Christ's righteousness, bought with the price of his blood on the cross. This I received by faith. The reason it had been so difficult for me to have a personal faith in Christ was that I had not experienced total forgiveness. But I had now brought real sins — including my attitudes of self-dependence and blame-shifting — to a real Savior, and they had been forgiven ... How awesome it is to be loved unconditionally by a holy, righteous God.

– Rose M. Miller, *From Fear to Freedom*

PART III – LIVING OUT OUR ADOPTION

To live "by faith" is not a general "positive attitude," but a deliberate attempt to fire the heart with a knowledge of who we are in Christ and to live consistently with that knowledge.

"Sonship, [therefore] must be the controlling thought — the normative category, if you like — at every point." (J.I.Packer).

Here are all the responsibilities or duties of the Christian life recast and understood in terms of sonship:

A. Responsibilities of adopted children:

1. New motivation

"If the love of a father will not make a child delight in him, what will?"

– John Owen, *Communion with God*

"A perfect man would never act from sense of duty; he'd always want the right thing more than the wrong one. Duty is only a substitute for love (of God and of other people) like a crutch which is a substitute for a [healthy] leg. Most of us need the crutch at times; but of course it is idiotic to use the crutch when our own legs (our own loves, tastes, habits, etc.) can do the journey on their own."

– C.S. Lewis *Letters* 18 July 1957

2. Obedience

"[The Sermon on the Mount] teaches Christian conduct not by giving a full scheme of rules and a detailed casuistry, to be followed with mechanical precision, but by indicating a broad and general way the spirit, direction and objectives, the guiding principles and ideals, by which the Christian must steer his course. It is often noted that this is... quite different from the tax-consultant type of instruction which was the stock-in-trade of Jewish lawyers and scribes in our Lord's day. What is less often noticed is that it is precisely the kind of moral instruction that parents are constantly trying to give their children — concrete, imaginative, teaching general principles from particular instances, and seeking all the time to bring the children to appreciate and share the parent's own attitudes and view of life... The all-embracing principles of conduct: [1] imitating the Father... (Mt.5:44-45,48)... [2] glorifying the Father [bringing him honor and credit before others] (Mt. 5:16; 6:9)... [3] pleasing the Father... (Mt.6:1)."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

3. Family resemblance

"'Gospel holiness'... was Puritan shorthand for authentic Christian living, springing from love and gratitude to God, in contrast with the spurious 'legal holiness' that consisted merely of forms, routines and outward appearances, maintained from self-regarding motives... [Gospel holiness] is simply a matter of a child of God being true to type, [resembling the Father]... expressing one's adoption in one's life... while it is certainly true that justification frees one forever from the need to keep the law as a means of earning life, it is equally true that adoption obliges us to keep the law as the means of pleasing one's newfound Father. Law-keeping [is transformed now, it is] **the family likeness of God's children**... [Now] the sins of God's children do not destroy their justification or nullify their adoption, but they mar the children's fellowship with [and their family likeness to] the Father..."

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

4. Trust

“All Christians are, in fact, called to a life of faith, in the sense of following God’s will at whatever cost and trusting him for the consequences. But all are tempted to put status and security, in human terms, before loyalty to God; and then, if they resist that temptation, they are at once tempted to worry about the likely effect of their stand... On those thus tempted in the life of faith, Jesus brings the truth of their adoption to bear... ‘Do not worry about your life... your heavenly Father knows what you need...’ (Mt.6:31-33)”

5. Acceptance of discipline

“In this world, royal children have to undergo extra training and discipline which other children escape, in order to fit them for their high destiny. It is the same with the children of the King of kings. The clue to understanding all his dealings with them is to remember that throughout their lives he is training them for what awaits them, and chiseling them into the image of Christ.”

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

B. Privileges of adopted children:

Here are all the privileges or blessings of the Christian life recast and understood in terms of sonship:

1. Assurance

“Social experts drum into us these days that the family unit needs to be stable and secure, and that any unsteadiness in the parent-child relationship takes its toll in strain, neurosis and arrested development in the child himself. The depressions, randomness and immaturities that mark children of broken homes are known to us all. But... in God’s family... you have absolute stability and security. The very concept of adoption is itself proof and guarantee of the preservation of the saints, for only bad fathers throw their children out of the family, even under provocation...”

– J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, chap 19

2. Prayer and intimacy

“This is what prayer really means: knowing that we have a secure relationship with God in which we can address him in the knowledge that he cares, and has the power to aid us... Jesus encourages us to pray simply. This distinguishes the child of God from the hypocrite. The hypocrite is so unsure of his relationship with God (and rightly so!) that he thinks of prayer in terms of its length and eloquence; the child of God knows he is speaking to the Father, and talks simply and directly... Jesus also encourages us to pray boldly... Boldness [which is] impudence in a neighbor is the privilege of the children of the family.”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

3. Freedom and confidence

“The parable of the prodigal son epitomizes the disposition of some Christians, even when they are restored to fellowship with God. Lurking in their hearts there often remains this sneaking suspicion: ‘I am not worthy to be God's son, but perhaps I can struggle through as one of his hired servants’ [see Luke 15:19]. At the root of such thinking is an inability to believe that salvation is entirely of God's grace and love. We contribute nothing to it; we can do nothing to earn it in any way. We are often slow to realize the implications of that. We are sons, but we are [always] in danger of having the mindset of hired servants....the Devil...will try to produce in us what our forefathers called ‘a bondage frame of spirit’... [When Paul says in Romans 8:15 that God sends us ‘a Spirit of sonship’ rather than a spirit of fear, he means] God sends His Spirit into our hearts, bringing us the deep spiritual and psychological security that rests on the objective fact that... we belong to the Lord.”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

4. Fellowship and connection

“We are to learn to accept and appreciate one another, no matter what natural differences might separate us... Rich and poor alike are to be treated as brothers... [We are to never give up on one another — to both confront and forgive in proportions as great as required.] Such a mixture of discipline and forgiveness is conceivable only within a family context... No family finds failure easy to handle... [But] only when we realize that the Church is a family, that we are brothers and sisters in that family, will we have a right perspective from which to view those who fail badly, and a right motive to see them disciplined faithfully, and welcomed back with many reaffirmations of our love... These are all part of what it means to ‘keep on loving each other as brothers.’ (Heb.13:1)”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

5. Inheritance

“Adoption is incomplete in this world. John says that... we are God's children, but it does “not yet appear what we shall be” in the future... (I John 3:1-3). Similarly, Paul teaches that although we have already received the Spirit of adoption... (Romans 8:15), we are still waiting for the full experience of our sonship, for ‘the glorious freedom of the children of God’ (Romans 8:21). The redemption of our bodies, our adoption in all its glory, takes place at the final resurrection. Then... the image [family resemblance] now under repair will be completed.”

– Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*

