

Adoption into God's Family

By Nathan Warner

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. 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 1:3-6 NASB)

Even before God founded the earth, He chose to adopt men and women out of His creation to enter His household and become His children. How amazing is that!

WHAT IS BIBLICAL ADOPTION?

Let's first establish what adoption is not. Adoption is not foster-care (a short-term solution without parental rights). Believers are not trial candidates who live in fear of being thrown out of God's house if they don't behave just right. When we are first brought into God's household, He doesn't say,

“Okay, kid, these are the rules! If you cause trouble or disobey me, I'll kick you back into the system and you can be someone else's problem. I don't have to deal with you – you aren't ultimately my responsibility. But, if you are good and I like you, we can see about making this a little more permanent.”

If this was what God meant, He would have stuck with words like “slave” or “servant” to describe us and would never have used words like “adoption” or “son.” As Jesus explained, *“Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed”* (John 8:34b-36). A slave has no right to remain forever in his master's household – his stay there is dependent on his performance and the whims of His master. A son, however, does remain in his father's house forever.

Unlike foster-care, adoption of a child legally means they are permanently attached to the new parent with all rights and responsibilities – it is now a fact that *this* child BELONGS to *that* parent. The parent is declaring they are responsible for *that* child in all circumstances. Adoption also severs all ties to the powers and authorities that the child previously had belonged – those authorities that the children had looked to for protection, love, support, nourishment, and answers in their old life. Adopted children have been transferred out from under one authority into the power of another authority – their new parent. In this way, God *“has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son”* (Colossians 1:13). Adoption is permanent and legally binding. There is no going back.

Also, the adopting parent promises to raise their new child in the same way as a natural child—with the same love, respect, care, education, and discipline. Just as *“God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ*

Jesus” (Ephesians 2:5-7).

God is promising to raise His adopted children in the same way as His only begotten Son Jesus. We are to grow to be like Him.

HOW IS ONE ADOPTED?

The process of adoption comes only through Salvation in Jesus Christ. This is what it means to be “saved.” *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16 ESV). In order to be adopted, you must be “born of God,” “born again,” “born of the spirit,” or “born again through the word.” As Scripture describes it: *“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is **born of God**”* (1 John 5:1a), for *“as many as received Him [Jesus], to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”* (John 1:12-13).

The Holy Spirit is what re-births us as a new child that can now be adopted into God’s Household: *“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born** again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit’”* (John 3:3-6).

To be born again means to be recreated by God’s seed: *“You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God”* (1 Peter 1:23); *“therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). We have been changed. We are a new creature, a new creation that has been born by the Holy Spirit.

HOW DO WE KNOW WE’RE ADOPTED?

Not everyone who claims to be adopted is actually adopted. This causes a great deal of confusion in the Church, as there are many false converts and false teachers who claim to be God’s children. To make it worse, we cannot tell if other people truly are adopted, because adoption is a “heart condition” that only God can see, for only God sees the exact nature of the heart and the inner work that He has done to change and adopt someone.

But God does tell us there are at least two ways we can know if we are adopted. First, the Scriptures tells us we know by the testimony of the Holy Spirit indwelling us: *“For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’ **The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God**”* (Romans 8:15-16).

Secondly, those who are God’s children are disciplined by Him: *“**MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES**”* (Hebrews 12:5-6).

WHAT AGE DOES GOD SEE HIS ADOPTED CHILDREN AS?

Parents treat their 17-year old children very differently than their six-year old children. A lot of Believers seem to think we are like kids off to college with lots of independence. Scripture actually compares us to little children – young minors.

Jesus told His disciples, *“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 18:3 NKJV). Age here is important because a father is responsible for the welfare of his children who are minors. No faithful father will allow his 6 year-old to run away, nor does he kick them out of his house. To do so would be to neglect the child.

The age of the child is also important in regards to the child’s inheritance. Paul tells us, *“As long as the heir is a child [minor], he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. 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. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”* (Galatians 4:1-7).

We see here that while a young child is not a slave in his father’s house, he is treated no differently than a slave, even though he’s going to inherit everything one day. But how is a child treated like a slave? Well, a parent of a 6 year-old is constantly commanding their child to, “Pick up your toys!” “Brush your teeth!” “Stop roughhousing!” “Go to your room!” “Come here!” A young child has no authority in their father’s house. He is expected to obey his father without questioning him, even if he doesn’t understand why he must do something. If he throws a tantrum or disobeys, he will have to endure the discipline of his father.

In verse 3, Paul explains that before we were adopted, we were children enslaved to the world, but because of Jesus, God has sent forth His Spirit to change us into His Sons, which causes us to cry like a young child looking to Him: “Abba! Father!”

Because we are God’s Sons, we are heirs, but because God sees us as little children, we do not differ at all from slaves in His household (we can’t have our own way). This helps us unify where Paul sometimes speaks of Believers as slaves to God, but other times he refers to them as sons of God.

Also, we can see here that the Holy Spirit is likely the manager/guardian Paul refers to in Galatians, for the Holy Spirit is raising us up to maturity through the life-long process of sanctification. The end of our sanctification period is “the date set by the Father” when we are to receive our inheritance of eternal life from Him and a place in the Kingdom of Christ. This date will be realized by each Believer at death or at the Rapture.

HOW DOES GOD RAISE HIS CHILDREN?

God will have His way in raising His children. We are under His Holy Spirit’s guardianship, raising us up in maturity by the process of Sanctification, making us more like Jesus. *“Now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in **sanctification**, and the outcome, eternal life”* (Romans 6:22). *“For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God”* (Romans 8:14).

The process of sanctification involves discipline to make us disciplined children: *“MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES. 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? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons...He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness”* (Hebrews 12:5-11).

Discipline is not punishment, because punishment involves fear (1 John 4:18) – discipline is to make us disciplined sons so that *“we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, **we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ**”* (Ephesians 4:14-16), *“so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God”* (Colossians 1:10).

WHY IS GOD RAISING HIS CHILDREN UP?

God is raising us up to share in His holiness: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you”* (1 Peter 1:3-4). This inheritance is reserved in Heaven, which means none who are alive are mature enough yet to receive the inheritance. For as long as we are still living, the Spirit is still teaching us. During our *“stay on earth”* (1 Peter 1:17b), God gives us challenges, tests, and responsibilities to educate and train us up for our inheritance in Christ’s Kingdom on earth during the Millennium – that we would be mature and responsible sons: *“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ”* (Colossians 3:23-24).

CONSEQUENCES FOR REBELLIOUS CHILDREN

The adopted Child of God still struggles with sin (1 John 1:8) - rebellion against their Heavenly Father.

Although we have been purchased from the god of this world and adopted out from under his authority over our lives, we may at times desire to return to the ways of the world that we lived under when we were children enslaved to it. Like the children of Israel who rebelled against God, longing for the times of their enslavement to Egypt, we also can rebel against our Heavenly Father. But like in any good home, there are also consequences for rebellious behavior in God’s Household.

Some of these consequences may come in this life. God may let a disobedient child bear the consequences of their rebellion in order to discipline them. God allows His children to sin like a good parent must allow their child to bear the consequences of their actions so that they will learn about consequences for rebellious behavior—like a child who desires to touch the stove, refusing to listen to their parent who has said, “Don’t touch the stove!”

As a Child of God lives this life, our sin can still cause serious difficulties and trouble—broken relationships, loss of reputation, health issues, etc. God does not necessarily prevent us from experiencing these consequences, because we need to understand the dangers of sin.

There are also consequences for disobedience that pertain to our inheritance after this life: *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”* (2 Corinthians 5:10). In this life, the Child of God is supposed to be fruitful in their growth as they mature on the foundation of their adoption, building upon it works that please their Father. These things will be tested in God’s Holy presence, revealed in their true nature by fire: *“If any man’s work which he has built on it [the foundation of Christ] remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire”* (1 Corinthians 3:14-15).

A good earthly picture of this is when a wealthy family is gathered together to receive the disbursement of their father’s will—the inheritance he has allotted for each of them in his mighty estate. Some of the his children who he deemed worthy by their dedication to his instruction and who proved by their works that they were obedient children will receive large inheritances and responsibilities in the management his estate. Yet some of his children who were not as dedicated and obedient will receive less, and those who did not show discipline and were rebellious will receive nothing at all. This would be a very painful situation. However, all these heirs remain children of their father at the end of the disbursement and remain in his household.

We need to pay attention to the instruction and discipline of the Spirit. There are consequences for rebelliousness – in this life with discipline or after this life with our inheritance.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

Faithful children love their Father. They eagerly obey and learn from His instruction, and they accept discipline because they love and respect their father and want to be pleasing to Him and want to do the works that He does. Faithful children want to be like their father. This should be the motivation of beloved children. *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children”* (Ephesians 5:1). Even so, amen.