

KEYWORDS OF GRACE: "ADOPTION" Ephesians 1:4-5; Galatians 4:1-6; Romans 8:23-27

TAKE A FIRST LOOK.

I. Craig Barnes was the pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. He told, "When I was a child, my minister father brought home a 12-year-old boy named Roger, whose parents had died from a drug overdose. There was no one to care for Roger, so my folks decided they'd just raise him as if he were one of their own sons.

"At first it was quite difficult for Roger to adjust to his new home—an environment free of heroine-addicted adults! Every day, several times a day, I heard my parents saying to Roger:

"No, no. That's not how we behave in this family.'

"No, no. You don't have to scream or fight or hurt other people to get what you want.'

"No, no, Roger, we expect you to show respect in this family.' And in time Roger began to change.

"Now, did Roger have to make all those changes in order to become a part of the family? No. He was made a part of the family simply by the grace of my father. But did he then have to do a lot of hard work because he was in the family? You bet he did. It was tough for him to change, and he had to work at it. But he was motivated by gratitude for the incredible love he had received."

Pastor Barnes then asked, "Do you have a lot of hard work to do now that the Spirit has adopted you into God's family? Certainly. But not in order to become a son or a daughter of the heavenly Father. No, you make those changes because you are a son or daughter. And every time you start to revert back to the old addictions to sin, the Holy Spirit will say to you, 'No, no. That's not how we act in this family.'"¹

II. One of the powerful word pictures that describe the work that God does in our lives through Jesus Christ is just this: *adoption*. By His sheer grace and mercy through the completed work of Christ on the cross, God brings people who repent and turn to Christ in faith into His very family. As we will see from the writings of the Apostle Paul, this powerful word picture is full of meaning.

TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT EPHESIANS 1:4-5; GALATIANS 4:1-6; ROMANS 8:23-37.

I. ADOPTION EMPHASIZES THE LEGAL AND PERMANENT STATUS OF GOD'S CHILDREN.

^{ESV} **Ephesians 1:4-5:** "... even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. **In love⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will**"

1. This word picture highlights the change of legal standing before God at the point of conversion to Christ. As with any actual adoption, the parents are working on the deal long before the child knows anything about it. This was also true of God. In the mystery of His grace and love through Jesus Christ, we are told that God's original plan was to take people into His family. He had planned beforehand, in regard to His people, "for [their] adoption as sons through Jesus Christ."

¹ Craig Barnes, author and pastor of National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C.; from sermon "The Blessed Trinity" (5-30-99), submitted to PreachingToday.com.

Let me ask you to pause in your thinking for a moment. I used to try to order these powerful images or word pictures into some kind of chronological order. Let's see, does regeneration come first, then forgiveness, then reconciliation, then redemption, then salvation, then sanctification, then adoption? Or does adoption come before salvation? Or, can we experience both regeneration and adoption in the same life? Don't those categories seem mutually exclusive? I have now come to a better, and I believe more Biblically Christian way of seeing these special word pictures. My series has been named "Keywords of Grace" for a strategic reason. Each of these words give a different mental image for the work that God does in our lives when He reveals His truth to our minds about Jesus Christ and we come to put our faith in Him. They are all equally true and descriptive of that work *at one and the same time*. When you look at this powerful transformation from one angle, you see that God does this in our hearts. He makes us new in our spirit. It is such a work of God that we can describe it as being *born again/from above* (John 3:8)—*regeneration*. It also moves us from the position of being God's enemies, entangled in sin and death, to being God's friends through Christ. Well, that is the description of *reconciliation*. It feels and looks like we were in a terrible condition of deadly peril apart from Christ, and now He has rescued us and brought us to a place of safety. He has *saved us*. *Salvation!* Before, we were guilty of acts and attitudes that were evil. When we turned to Christ in repentance and faith, He *forgave* us those sins. *Forgiveness!* In fact, because Jesus Christ took our punishment on Himself, God, "the Judge of all the earth," has granted us pardon. We are free to live without condemnation. This is *justification!* We are declared righteous before the court of heaven and set apart as God's very own. From that moment forward, He both has made us holy to Himself and He sets about to make us that way in all our attitudes and actions. This is *sanctification*. And when we were hopelessly in bondage to sin and death, Jesus paid the price to set us free: *Redemption!* You see how powerfully these wonderful words describe what God does in our lives through Christ!?

And before God drew us to Himself through Christ, we were separated from Him. Now, in Christ, He has brought us into His very family! This is *adoption*. In adoption, we move from being outside God's family to being inside it, permanently brought into the realm of God's acceptance, love, and grace.

2. *This word picture also stresses the motivation of God: His love for His people. See Ephesians 1:4-5. "In love, he predestined us for adoption"*

A—Can we fathom today the significance of this truth?

I—It's something like this: Pastor Lee Strobel tells this story:

Shortly after the Korean War, a Korean woman had an affair with an American soldier, and she got pregnant. He went back to the United States, and she never saw him again. She gave birth to a little girl, and this little girl looked different than the other Korean children. She had light-colored, curly hair. In that culture, children of mixed race were ostracized by the community. In fact, many women would kill their children because they didn't want them to face such rejection.

But this woman didn't do that. She tried to raise her little girl as best she could. For seven years she tried to do that, until the rejection was too much. She did something that probably nobody in this room could imagine ever doing. She abandoned her little girl to the streets.

This little girl was ruthlessly taunted by people. They called her the ugliest word in the Korean language, *tooki*, alien devil. It didn't take long for this little girl to draw conclusions about herself based on the way people treated her.

For two years she lived in the streets, until finally she made her way to an orphanage. One day, word came that a couple from America was going to adopt a little boy. All the children in the orphanage got excited, because at least one little boy was going to have hope. He was going to have a family. So this little girl spent the day cleaning up the little boys—giving them baths and combing their hair—and wondering which one would be adopted by the American couple.

The next day the couple came, and this is what the girl recalled: "It was like Goliath had come back to life. I saw the man with his huge hands lift up each and every baby. I knew he loved every one of them as if they were his own. I saw tears running down his face, and I knew if they could, they would have taken the whole lot home with them.

"He saw me out of the corner of his eye. Now let me tell you. I was nine years old, but I didn't even weigh 30 pounds. I was a scrawny thing. I had worms in my body. I had lice in my hair. I had boils all over me. I was full of scars. I was not a pretty sight. But the man came over to me, and he began rattling away something in English, and I looked up at him. Then he took this huge hand and laid it on my face. What was he saying? He was saying, 'I want this child. This is the child for me.'"²

Now this is the power of what the Apostle Paul says to us through the letter to the Ephesians. So God looks down at us, spiritually stunted, marred by sin, and with the aroma of death all about us. Through Jesus Christ His Son, He lays His hand on our pockmarked faces and says, "I want this child!" Amazing grace, indeed!

II. ADOPTION ENCOMPASSES BOTH A "NOW" AND A "NOT YET" ELEMENT.

^{ESV} **Galatians 4:1-6:** I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything,² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

1. **Now**, we have entered God's family and are entitled to all the blessings of such a relationship. See Galatians 4:1-6.

a. This is like going from being a slave to being a son (or daughter). Galatians 4:1-3. Paul argues that before we hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and repent and receive Him into our lives by faith as Lord and Savior, we are no better than a slave to the "elementary principles of the world." In other words, his readers must not go back to trying to live by a form of legalism that was fitting for their minority—appropriate for them when they were children and not free adults. They must move forward to the freedom of life in Christ as full members of God's family of faith.

b. This is accomplished by the timely work of Christ. Galatians 4:4. Notice how Paul compares the history of humanity with the lifecycle of a boy that was growing up into manhood. Just as the boy becomes a man and assumes all the rights and privileges of the family, humanity "came of age," so to speak, when Jesus Christ came. Everything before Him anticipated His coming and His work on the cross; everything afterward must come to terms with this cosmic crisis: *God became man to turn those creatures He had made into His own children* (if I might recast a powerful statement of C. S. Lewis). And this happened at just the

² Lee Strobel, "Meet the Jesus I Know," *Preaching Today Audio #211*.

right moment of history: “when the time had fully come.” At just the right time set by the Father of us all, Christ came, “born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law (whether the Law of God or the law of conscience)—and notice how Paul makes this very personal: “in order that *we might receive the adoption.*” He just can’t talk in the third person any longer about this. It is too “close to home,” so to speak. He goes from “those” to “we.”

c. This is applied to our lives by the Spirit of God, Who cries out within our hearts, “Abba! Father!” Galatians 4:5 (cf. Romans 8:15-17). When we come to Christ by faith and receive Him into our hearts and lives, we receive something more than just a legal standing. We receive the very Spirit of God into our lives, who applies the transforming power of Jesus Christ to our souls. He cries out with the powerful affection of a child, “Abba! [something like, “Daddy!”] “Father!”

d. This gives us a settled expectation of future glory as “heirs of God.” Galatians 4:6. Having been brought into the family of God by our faith in Jesus Christ, we have every expectation for the inheritance that any other child would have in the family. And this brings us to the future aspect of the meaning of *adoption*.

2. In the future, God will complete this work by bringing our bodily life into line with His eternal purposes of redemption. See Romans 8:23-27.

my translation **Romans 8:23-27:** (22) For we know that the whole creation groans together and suffers birth pains together until the present; (23) and not only that, but also ourselves having the first fruit of the Spirit, we also ourselves are groaning within ourselves while we wait eagerly for adoption, the redemption of our body. (24) For in this hope we were saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for does anyone hope for what he sees? (25) But since we keep on hoping for what we do not see, we wait eagerly with perseverance.

(26) And likewise also the Spirit helps with our weaknesses, for we do not know how we should pray as it is necessary, but the Spirit Himself keeps on interceding with inexpressible sighs, (27) for the One who keeps searching the hearts knows what the way of thinking of the Spirit is, because He is interceding for saints according to God.

a. Our present experience of God’s grace and purpose is partial, not complete. Though our present experience also includes suffering, it is the kind of suffering that comes from impending life, not impending death. I remind you again that Paul uses the analogy of birth pains for a strategic reason. Birth pains are severe, and even (in the ancient world) life-threatening. But they are not the pains of impending death; *they are the pains of impending life*. They are the kind of pain attached to a new life coming into the world. He did not use the pain of a terminal illness or of an injury in battle or of a mortal accident. Those pains are the pains of impending death. Therefore, the suffering of Christians is different than the general suffering of others. It yields a different end. *Life* lies just ahead! It is about to burst forth with one final push! So in the meantime, there is this experience of waiting for the moment of final delivery.

b. Our future prospect generates a spirit of hope and eager expectation in our hearts. This fits well with the analogy of birth pains, too. Even though pregnancy is very uncomfortable and quite limiting for the mother, there is also this wonderful expectation of the child yet to come. We can hardly wait to have a turn of holding that child in our own arms! And so it is for this ultimate meaning of adoption. Paul defines this meaning as, “the redemption of our bodies.” He speaks of the body being transformed along with the rest of creation. Up to now, all creation has suffered the same birth pains. It is “in bondage to decay.” We feel this in our

very bones, don't we! But this is not the whole story, nor the end of the story. There is so much more ahead. When we come to believe this, when God's very Spirit is alive inside our minds crying out with the joy of children freshly brought into the family, our hope is brought to life.

c. In the meantime, God sustains us through the intercession of His Spirit on our behalf. This is another of the works of the Spirit of God in the hearts of God's children. Once we are adopted into the family, we no longer are on our own. We have the Spirit of God to cry out to the Father on our behalf. And, he always knows exactly what to ask for.

A—We have a glorious future guaranteed to us because we have been brought into God's family by adoption.

I—One of Jesus' analogies for His relationship with His people was of the Good Shepherd and His sheep. The promise that He made to His followers along this analogy means even more considering they are a part of God's very family: ^{NET} **John 10:27-30:** "*My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand.²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them from my Father's hand.³⁰ The Father and I are one.*" No wonder that "they took up stones to stone Him," the next moment! What a claim! What a promise! What a hope! And hey, if He makes such a promise to us when we are considered like His sheep, how much greater is the promise when it is made to His children!

TAKE IT HOME (APPLICATIONS)

I. So where do we stand in relation to the Father today? Have we allowed Him to bring us into the family? The only thing He won't do is make the final step of faith that is required of us. He initiates. He reveals His truth. He presses His claims upon our hearts. He compels us by His Spirit. He enables us by His grace. And we must receive Him by faith.

^{NET} **John 1:11-13:** *He came to what was his own, but his own people did not receive him.¹² But to all who have received him— those who believe in his name—he has given the right to become God's children¹³ —children not born by human parents or by human desire or a husband's decision, but by God.*

II. Will we "believe in his name" and "receive him" into our lives as Lord and Savior today? What are we waiting for? What more can He say and do?

III. Are we living in the fullness of this Father-child relationship today? Developing our walk with Him through meditation on the Scriptures and in prayer?