

FROM SLAVERY TO SONSHIP  
PART 5

TEXT: GALATIANS 4:1-7

February 6, 2011

**INTRO/REVIEW:**

Adoption is the highest privilege the gospel offers and ongoing assurance of our status with God is critical for our Christian lives. Yet, because of the nature of sanctification, doubts invariably creep in and we can quickly lose assurance of this great privilege. One of the reasons we lose assurance is because we have not properly understood adoption (i.e., the gospel) and how it permanently changes the way we belong to God.

The desires of our flesh wage war against the desires of the Spirit (Gal. 5:17). Sin still clings to us and continually disturbs our conscience and hinders our faith and we fall back into thinking of ourselves as slaves rather than as sons. It is in such moments that the inner witness of the Holy Spirit plays a critical role in assuring us of our sonship.

This leads us to a third way God the Father brings us from slavery to sonship.

**LESSON:**

III. GOD THE FATHER SENT THE HOLY SPIRIT TO CONFIRM OUR SONSHIP. vv. 6-7

God the Father not only sent His Son into the world to merit our sonship (vv. 4-5) but He also sent the Spirit into our hearts in order to apply the redemption that the Son achieved on the cross and to give us the assurance that we are sons.

Loving, concerned parents always seek to assure their children that they are loved and accepted. In the same way (though of infinite degrees more!), God the Father desires for His children to be assured of this great privilege of adoption.

Few things are more powerfully motivating than the assurance of a father's love and few things are more paralyzing than rejection and estrangement. Adoption is the remedy for our alienation and estrangement from God the Father.

In vv. 4-7, Paul reveals how God the Father dealt with our estrangement by taking us from being "children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2) to welcoming us as sons in His family.

That God the Father would desire and determine to redeem and adopt disobedient sons to Himself and welcome them into His household is the essence of the Gospel (cf. Burke, *Adopted into God's Family*, p. 196).

God the Father wants us to receive and rest in His Fatherly care and love. He wants us to know that we are welcomed, wanted and invited; to live with a sense of belonging.

J.I. Packer writes, “Our heavenly Father intends His children to know His love for them, and their own security in His family. He would not be the perfect Father if He did not want this, and if He did not act to bring it about” (*Knowing God*, p. 227).

Therefore, He not only sent the Son into the world to merit our sonship (vv. 4-5) but He also sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts to confirm our sonship (vv. 6-7).

Notice that it is in “our hearts” (i.e., the core and center of our being; where one thinks, feels and wills) that Paul says the Spirit has been sent. In contrast to the law and the legalistic teaching of the Judaizers, which is solely external and cannot change the heart, the Holy Spirit enters the deepest core of our being and brings life (Gal. 3:21; see also 2 Cor. 3:6, 17). Thus, deep in the core of our thinking, feeling and willing, the Spirit assures us that God is for us and not against us; that He is our Father and no longer our Judge.

Notice how the Trinity is involved in the work of our adoption. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit work together to bring about our adoption as sons. God the Father is the author of our sonship. God the Son merits our sonship. And God the Spirit confirms our sonship. Salvation is always Trinitarian (i.e., Of the Father, In the Son and Through the Spirit).

Since adoption is the work of the Trinity, it naturally follows that this privilege is not the result of anything we have done but rather because of what God has done for us. Adoption is “received” (ἀπολαμβάνειν) not earned (v. 5).

Notice also that this work of the Spirit is universal among God’s children. The Holy Spirit does not come in as a subsequent experience later on in your Christian life. Rather, the Holy Spirit comes in at the beginning of your Christian life. The moment you trust in Christ, you possess the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. 3:2, 5, 14). And immediately, when the Holy Spirit enters our hearts He begins to cry out, “Abba! Father!”

The participle, “crying” is a strong word, expressing deep emotion (cf. Matt. 9:27; 14:26, 30; 15:22; 27:50). This strong, filial cry (“Abba! Father!”) is the Holy Spirit bearing witness to us that we are indeed sons of God. Calvin notes that this internal work of the Spirit “gives to us a well-founded belief that God regards us with a father’s love” (*Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 21, p. 120*).

What then is this “Abba! Father!” cry? How are we to understand it?

A. “ABBA! FATHER!” IS AN EXPRESSION OF INTIMACY.

The term “*Abba*” is the Aramaic word for Father. Timothy George cautions against having an over sentimentalized understanding of this term by referring to it as mere baby talk and translating it as “daddy” (see *Galatians*, p. 307).

The emphasis is not so much infancy as it is intimacy. The relational intimacy Jesus shared with His Father is the same relational intimacy the Holy Spirit produces in our hearts.

Notice in 4:8 that Paul says slavery means we do not know God. Here is the great test of being a slave versus as son: Do I know God?

Not, do I know God as some distant figure of which I know some things about Him? But the real question is do you know God as a father who loves you, to whom you belong? In other words, do you have intimacy with him?

A lot of people know my wife and some things about her. But, no one knows her the way I know her. To be a slave is to know God as a distant figure rather than as a loving Father.

A slave says, “yes Master.” But, only a son cries out, “Father.”

Calvin writes, “It is the more necessary to fix in our minds this doctrine of Paul, that no man is a Christian who has not learned, by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, to call God his Father” (*Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 121).

If your Christian life is a matter of bondage to legalism, you lose intimacy with God. This is a great test of where we are spiritually. We have been redeemed to be a son in order to live in intimacy with our Father yet so many believers go on living like a slave in distance and cold formality with a master.

Our heavenly Father will have no more of that than the prodigal son’s father would have it when his son said to him, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants” (Lk. 15:15, 21).

His father responded, “What are you talking about? I have been waiting for you. His father felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him and threw a big celebration for him” (15:20, 22-24). This is what the Father is like in Jesus’ teaching.

Intimacy with the Father is what the Spirit creates in us when He enters our hearts and gives to us a true, saving knowledge of God.

B. “ABBA! FATHER!” IS AN EXPRESSION OF CONFIDENCE.

This “Abba! Father!” cry is used in only two other places in the NT (Mk. 14:36; Rom. 8:15). In Romans 8:15, Paul writes, “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall

back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”

A spirit of bondage, distrust and fear is the effect of the law and characterizes all who are not acquainted with God the Father’s work of adoption.

A slave relates to God by law (self-performance) rather than by promise (gospel). The law only reveals my sin (Rom. 3:20) and the dreadful curse of God’s law against it (Gal. 3:10). The Law produces a fearful apprehension of standing before God (cf. Heb. 12:18-21). This is all a person is made aware of when attempting to live by the Law. And so a slave is characterized by a fearful, distrust; a reticence of God’s favor and therefore lacks confidence.

In contrast, a spirit of sonship (confident trust) is the effect of the gospel. The Holy Spirit does not lead us to slavery but rather to the freedom as sons! The cry of the Spirit produces in our hearts a settled confidence in God and our reconciliation with Him.

The cry of the Spirit drowns out the thunderous, condemning voices of the law, our conscience and the accuser of the brethren! Martin Luther writes,

...in the midst of these terrors of the Law, thunderclaps of sin, tremors of death, and roarings of the devil, Paul says, the Holy Spirit begins to cry in our heart: ‘Abba! Father!’ And His cry vastly exceeds, and breaks through, the powerful and horrible cries of the Law, sin, death, and the devil! It penetrates the clouds and heaven, and it reaches all the way to the ears of God (Luther’s Works, vol. 26, p. 381).

The Spirit makes the living and dying of Jesus on our behalf real to us (vv. 4-5). By the work of the Spirit, the objective truth of the gospel is realized deep in our hearts as being “for us” (see 3:13).

The Spirit leads us to confidence and heartfelt rejoicing in the Father’s love toward us because of what Christ has done on our behalf (see *Knowing God*, p. 227). By means of the Spirit’s work in our hearts, we possess child-like trust (confidence) in the Father. We live with a confidence that through the redemption of Christ the way of access to the Father has been opened forever!

This confident trust is what J.I. Packer calls “feeling knowledge” (i.e., an immediate assurance in our hearts born of the Spirit that makes us confident of the Father’s love for us; see *Knowing God*, p. 227). To be sure, as Packer notes, this immediate assurance of the Spirit in our hearts is “more easier conceived than described...more easily felt than tell’t” (p. 227).

Once again, this is a great test of where we are spiritually. Legalism (seeking to gain or keep God’s favor by what you do) destroys a person’s confidence in God. For, if you are

all the time wondering, “Have I pleased Him enough? What can I do to earn God’s favor?” you have lost the confidence and security, which a child knows with his father.

And then third,

C. “ABBA! FATHER! IS AN EXPRESSION OF A CRY FOR DELIVERANCE.

Again you will notice that Paul writes, “God has sent *the Spirit of His Son* into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (emphasis mine). This unique phrase, “the Spirit of His Son,” is found only here in Paul’s letters. Trevor Burke notes that this phrase “demonstrates how sonship and the Spirit are inseparable parts of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus” (*Adopted Into God’s Family*, p. 143).

These words echo the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. In Mark 14:36, Jesus in great distress prays, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

At the very moment Jesus was working to obtain our intimate, confident fellowship with the Father, He was losing His sense of closeness and fellowship with His Father. Thus, Jesus’ prayer was a cry for deliverance. The Holy Spirit, Paul says, places this same cry for deliverance in our hearts because we are now sons of God. We are sons of God and cry for deliverance because we have received the same Spirit as His only Son (see Calvin, p. 120).

However, there is a major difference between the Son’s cry and our cry. We do not cry for the removal of the cup of wrath against our sin. The Son, who has redeemed us, has done this for us (vv. 4-5; 3:13).

Rather, our cry is for the consummation of our adoption. In Romans 8:23, Paul writes, “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as *we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies*” (emphasis mine).

In one sense we are *already* enjoying the privileges of our adoption as sons. But we are *not yet* enjoying the ultimate privilege of receiving perfect resurrection bodies in a new heavens and new earth where we will experience perfect fellowship with God and one another. The Holy Spirit places this deep groaning within our hearts for our final deliverance.

Once again, this is a great test of where we are spiritually. Do you know what it is to groan inwardly, earnestly desiring to be fully done with your sin? Are you eagerly waiting for the consummation of your adoption as a son (i.e., the resurrection and return of Christ)?

This cry for deliverance is grounded in the hope of the gospel. The great hope of the gospel is the resurrection, the new heavens and the new earth (cf. Rev. 21:1-4).

The Holy Spirit's work is to make our hearts increasingly long to be totally delivered from sin and to eagerly anticipate the day when we will live on the New Earth as glorified sons of God in perfect fellowship with our Heavenly Father as well as one another. "The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come" (Rev. 22:17).

If your heart cries "Abba! Father!" Paul says you can be assured that you are no longer a slave but rather a son.

**REFLECTION:**

Paul concludes in v. 7, " So/therefore (ὥστε) you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

Because God the Father sent the Son into the world, all who trust in Christ are no longer like a child under the law with no rights to the inheritance (vv. 1-2). Instead, whoever is a son is an heir as well. We have not only been placed in God's family but we have also been made heirs of His entire estate!

Furthermore, because God the Father sent the Son into the world, all who trust in Christ are no longer enslaved to the elementary principles of the world (v. 3). Through faith in Christ alone, the shackles of bondage to the law have been thrown off and we are granted the privilege of belonging to God as our Father. The Christian has been redeemed from from the slave market of sin and the curse of the law. Martin Luther writes, "...There is no slavery in Christ but only sonship; for when faith comes, the slavery ends..." (*Luther's Works, vol. 26, p. 390*).

And finally, because God the Father sent the Spirit of His Son into the deepest recesses of our inner most being, we are assured that our redemption and adoption are true "for us." The Holy Spirit confirms to us that God the Father desires to enter into a relationship with us. There can be no greater privilege than having God as our Father.

© John Fonville

Permissions: Permission is happily granted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not revise the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on Paramount's website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by John Fonville.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Fonville.

