

# Adoption: The Heart of the Gospel

Eight Similarities Between God's Adoption of Us and Our Adoption of Children  
MICAH Fund Adoption Enrichment Seminar

By John Piper February 10, 2007

## Galatians 4:4-8

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!" 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. 8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

## Romans 8:14-17

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 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!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

The biblical foundation for the act of adopting children is primarily in the New Testament rather than the Old. There are only three adoptions in the Old Testament (Moses, Esther, and Genubath, 1 Kings 11:20). Israel is called God's son (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:6; Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1) but not until the New Testament is this called *adoption*.

## The Foundation of Adoption

The deepest and strongest foundation of adoption is located not in the act of humans adopting humans, but in God adopting humans. And this act is not part of his ordinary providence in the world; it is at the heart of the gospel. Galatians 4:4-5 is as central a gospel statement as there is: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." God did not have to use the concept of adoption to explain how he saved us, or even how we become part of his family. He could have stayed with the language of new birth so that all his children were described as children by nature only (John 1:12-13, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were *born*, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."). But he chose to speak of us as *adopted* as well as being children by new *birth*. This is the most essential foundation of the practice of adoption.

## Eight Similarities

What I would like to do is lay out eight similarities between what God did in adoption and what happens in a Christian adoption today. I pray that whether you have adopted, or are engaged in assisting adoptions, or are pondering an adoption, God will use these comparisons to heighten your confidence that God is graciously involved in our adoptions. He has done it himself. He knows what it costs. And he stands ready to support us all the way to the end.

### 1. Adoption was (for God) and is (for us) costly.

When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, **to redeem** those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

*To redeem* means to obtain or to set free by paying a price. What was the price that God paid for our liberation and adoption? In the previous chapter, we heard the answer: "Christ *redeemed* us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (Galatians 3:13). It cost God the price of his Son's life.

There are huge costs in adopting children. Some are financial; some are emotional. There are costs in time and stress for the rest of your life. You never stop being a parent till you die. And the stresses of caring about adult children can be as great, or greater, than the stresses of caring for young children. There is something very deep and right about the embrace of this cost for the life of a child!

Few things bring me more satisfaction than seeing a culture of adoption flourish at Bethlehem. It means that our people are looking to their heavenly Father for their joy rather than rejecting the stress and cost of children in order to maximize their freedom and comforts. When people embrace the pain and joy of children rather than using abortion or birth control simply to keep children away, the worth of Christ shines more visibly. Adoption is as far as possible from the mindset that rejects children as an intrusion. Praise God for people ready to embrace the suffering known and unknown. God's cost to adopt us was infinitely greater than any cost we will endure in adopting and raising children.

## **2. Adoption did (for God) and does (for us) involve the *legal status* of the child.**

When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And ***because you are sons***, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Galatians 4:4-6)

There were legal realities God had to deal with. His own justice and law demanded that we be punished and excluded from his presence for our sins. Righteousness was required and punishment demanded. God had to satisfy his justice and his law in order to adopt sinners into his family. This he did by the life, death, and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ.

This means that the status of being a son legally preceded the experience of the Spirit coming to give us the affections of sons. We are legally sons before we experience the joy of sonship. The object work of our salvation (two thousand years ago at Calvary) precedes and grounds the subjective experience of our salvation by the Spirit today.

So it is with our adopting children today: The legal transactions precede and under gird the growth of family feelings. If the legal red tape seems long and hard, keep in mind that this tape is not yet red with your blood, but Jesus satisfied all the legal demands precisely by shedding his blood.

## **3. Adoption was blessed and is blessed with God's pouring out a *Spirit of sonship*.**

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 to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. (Romans 8:15-16)

God does not leave us in the condition of aliens when he adopts us. He does not leave us with no feelings of acceptance and love. Rather, he pours his Spirit into our hearts to give us the experience of being embraced in the family. What is remarkable about these two texts is the term *abba*. It is an Aramaic word. Why then does Paul use it, transliterated, in these two letters written in Greek?

The answer is that it was the way Jesus spoke to his Father, in spite of the fact that virtually no one in Jewish culture referred to God with this endearing word *abba*. It stunned the disciples. They held onto it as a precious remnant of the very voice of Jesus in the language he spoke. In Mark 14:36, Jesus is in Gethsemane and prays, "*Abba, Father*, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." Therefore, in adopting us, God give us the very Spirit of his Son and grants us to feel the affections of belonging to the very family of God.

In the mercy of God, in our families God works to awaken affections in adopted children for their parents that are far more than legal outcomes. They are deeply personal and spiritual bonds. Adopted children do not *infer* that they are our children by checking out the adoption papers. A spirit pervades our relationship that bears witness to this reality. Like the other children in the family, they all cry, "Daddy."

Praise God that he give us *both* legal standing as his children *and* the very Spirit of his Son so that we find ourselves saying from a heart of deep conviction, "Abba, Father."

## **4. Adoption was (for God) and is (for us) marked by *moral transformation* through the Spirit.**

All who are *led by the Spirit* of God are sons of God." (Romans 8:14)

God does not leave his children without help to bear the moral image of the family. We may trust that his help will be there for our children as we bring them under the means of grace that God uses to awaken and transform his children.

## **5. Adoption brought us, and brings our children, the rights of being *heirs of the Father*.**

Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an *heir through God*. (Galatians 4:6-7)

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, *then heirs--heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ*, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be *glorified with him*. (Romans 8:16-17)

Notice that Galatians 4:7 says we are heirs “through God” and Romans 8:17 says we are heirs “of God.” In Galatians, the context is the promise of Abraham through God, that is, by his sending his Son to redeem us, we are heirs with Abraham (even though many of us are Gentiles!) of his inheritance, namely the *world* (Romans 4:13). But in Romans 8:17, the context is that we, with Christ, are heirs of all that God has, namely, everything. “All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Corinthians 3:21).

Just before we left for England on sabbatical, Noel and I went to a lawyer and updated our wills. All the boys are married, and Talitha is the only legal “dependent.” A lot had changed since the last time we made wills. This was a reminder to us that she will inherit like the sons. She is not in a lesser adoptive class. All inherit together. That is the way God did it. That is the way we do it.

## **6. Adoption was (for God) and is (for us) seriously *planned*.**

He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In *love he predestined us for adoption* as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:4-6)

Adoption in God’s mind was not Plan B. He predestined us for adoption before the creation of the world. Plan A was not lots of children who never sin and never need to be redeemed. Plan A was creation, fall, redemption, adoption so that the full range of God’s glory and mercy and grace could be known by his adopted children. Adoption was not second best. It was planned from the beginning.

In our lives, there is something uniquely precious about having children by birth. That is a good plan. There is also something different, but also uniquely precious, about adopting children. Each has its own uniqueness. Your choice to adopt children may be sequentially second. But does not have to be *secondary*. It can be as precious and significant as having children by birth. God is able to make adoption and A+ plan in our lives.

## **7. Adoption was (for God) and often is now (for us) *from very bad situations*.**

We . . . were by nature *children of wrath*, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:3)

God did not find us like an abandoned foundling bundled on the front step and irresistibly cute. He found us ugly and evil and rebellious. We were not attractive. We would not be easy children to deal with. And, what’s worse, God himself was angry with us. He hates sin and rebellion. We were then doubly “children of wrath.”

These are the ones God pursued in adoption. Therefore, all of God’s adoptions crossed a greater moral and cultural divide than any of our adoptions could. The distance between what we are, and what God is, is infinitely greater than any distance between us and a child we might adopt. God crossed the greatest cultural barrier to redeem and adopt us.

Consider too, that according to Romans 9:4, the people that God chose in the Old Testament, the Israelites, were adopted out of a terrible situation. “*They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.*” But how was this adoption effected? Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and *out of Egypt I called my son.*” They were slaves in Egypt. But not only that, they were often also rebellious against God. “Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea” (Psalm 106:7).

Therefore, God went and took a son from Egypt who was both enslaved and rebellious. The pattern is set: adoptions do not just come from nice, healthy, safe, auspicious situations.

## **8. Adoption meant (for all Christians) and means (for Christian parents) that we *suffer now and experience glory later*.**

The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 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*. (Romans 8:22-23)

This strikes us as strange. Aren’t we already adopted? Why does Paul say that we are “waiting for our adoption”? Yes, we are already adopted. When Christ died for us, the price was paid, and when we trust him, we are legally and permanently in the family. But God’s purpose for adoption is not to leave any of his children in a state of groaning and suffering. He raised Jesus from the dead with a new body, and he promises that part of our adoption will be a new

resurrection body with no more disabilities and no more groaning. Therefore, what we wait for is the *full experience* of our adoption--the resurrection of our bodies.

There is much groaning in the path of adoption on the way to full salvation. But the outcome is glorious. It is worth it all. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

This is especially relevant for parents of children with disabilities. They know the "groaning" of this life. All of us have children with some sort of disability, and some of us will live to get very old and watch our children age and die before we do. Others will see their children struck down in war or by accident or disease. Others will care for a disabled child till one of them dies. All of this groaning is groaning in hope because we are adopted by God and destined for a resurrection and an eternal future of health and wholeness and joy. It will be worth it all.

\*\*\*

### **Adopting Talitha Ruth**

In conclusion, it might be helpful for you to hear some of the process that Noel and I walked through in deciding to adopt Talitha. We spent long hours and days pondering and praying over whether to adopt in 1995. It was not a light or easy decision. I was fifty years old. Here is the letter I wrote to Noel saying yes.

Monday, November 6, 1995, 11:12 PM

Dear Noel,

With confidence in the all-sufficient future grace of God, I am ready and eager to move ahead with the adoption of Talitha Ruth. I want to thank you that during these years, when your heart has yearned to adopt a daughter, you have not badgered me or coerced me. You have been wonderfully patient. You have modeled faith in the sufficiency of prayer. You have always expressed support of me and my ministry even if we should never adopt. You have been reasonable in all our discussions and have come forth with your rationale only when asked. You have honored my misgivings as worthy of serious consideration. God was good to put it in Phoebe's heart to call about this child when she did, and not before we were ready.

I realize more than ever that "the mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps." This decision is not merely a tabulation of pros and cons. I would be deceiving myself to think that. Yet I am persuaded that this decision to adopt honors God more than not adopting. To my perspective, it seems to be the path that will "spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples." I believe it will bless Bethlehem and not hinder our work there. I believe it is the path of the greatest love for the greatest number. And therefore I have confidence that God is pleased with it.

I choose it not under constraint or with any reservation of commitment. I relinquish every thought that, because you initiated this idea, you will bear blame for the burdens it will bring. As with our choice to have children in the first place and with our choice to go to Germany and our choice to leave Bethel and enter the pastorate, there is a common and united commitment to all that God will be for us in this path, including any "frowning providence" that he plans to sanctify to us. I believe our eyes are open, though we have learned that the toothache expected and the toothache experienced are not the same. We have come through enough to believe that God's future grace will be sufficient. His mercies are new every morning and there will be mercies for every weight and wonder on this new path of our lives.

I thank God for you. I enter with you gladly on this path. Whether we live to see our daughter grown or not, we will have done well to take her in. Life is very short, whether 12 hours like Ashley Hope, or 50 years like me, or 76 years like my father, or 94 years like Crystal Anderson. What matters is not that we do all we might have done or all we dreamed of doing, but that, while we live, we live by faith in future grace and walk in the path of love. The times are in God's hands, not ours.

With this common conviction, we will, God willing, embrace our new daughter and give ourselves, with all the might that God inspires in us, to love her into the kingdom. May the Lord establish the plans of our hearts, and bring Talitha Ruth (and the future husband God already knows) into deep and lasting fellowship with Christ. May she be an ebony brooch of beauty around your aging neck and a crown of purity and joy on your graying head.

I love you,  
Johnny

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter 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 our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Desiring God.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)