

## **“The Spirit of Adoption”**

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*<sup>12</sup>So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— <sup>13</sup>for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup>For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” <sup>16</sup>it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. <sup>18</sup>I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup>for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

*(Romans 8: 12-25)*

As we continue through the Apostle Paul’s discussion of human sin and God’s grace, we receive yet another metaphor to help us understand the challenge of sin and how God meets that challenge and bridges the chasm that separates us from God’s righteousness. I love the way the preacher Charles Spurgeon introduced this image in one of his more famous sermons from London back in 1860. He begins with the pit that we have dug for ourselves through sin and selfishness. “*I think I need not remind you of your condition here below,*” he begins.

*“You are too conversant with it, being hourly fretted with troubles, vexed with your own infirmities [and temptations]... and with all the allurements of this world... There are too many thorns in your nest, to permit you to hope for [heaven]. I say, it is utterly needless for me to refresh your memories about your present condition; but I feel it will be a good and profitable work if I remind you that there are high privileges of which you are possessors even now; there are divine joys which even this day you may taste. The wilderness has its manna; the desert is gladdened with water from the rock. God hath not forsaken us; the tokens of his goodness are with us, and we may rejoice in full many a gracious boon which is ours this very day. I shall direct your joyous attention to one precious jewel in your treasury, namely, your adoption into the family of God.”<sup>1</sup>*

As Spurgeon is saying, we are aware, even at this very moment, that we inhabit two different worlds... that we all have a foot in two different realities with two contrasting

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “The Sons of God,” October 7, 1860, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-sons-of-god/#flipbook/>



feelings. To use the language Paul uses, we are pulled between “a spirit of slavery” on one hand, and “a spirit of adoption” on the other. On one side, we continue to be fretted with troubles, infirmities, temptations, and allurements. As Paul would say, we remain in many ways slaves to sin. At the same time, we also have this amazing jewel in our crown – the fact that God has chosen to give us an inheritance in heaven anyway... that we have already, even now, been adopted as God’s beloved children, with all rights and privileges appertaining thereunto.

I want to concede, right from the outset, that I have no personal experience with adoption. I myself was not adopted, nor were our daughters. But I have tried to listen to those who have had experienced adoption, and I do try to empathize, relate, and at least partially understand. In some ways, the same is true with regard to the ways we think about our *spiritual* adoption. We know very well the condition of our lives in this broken world, but our experience of the holiness of God is more remote and partial. We get momentary glimpses of its beauty... we may sense touches of God’s distinctive warmth and love... but the contact feels more removed, perhaps even distant. Still we try to listen, relate, and do our best to at least partially understand.

A good place to begin may be by noting how remarkable it was that Paul used this metaphor at all. Legal adoption of a child from a birth family to another family does not seem to have been part of Jewish culture. It was, at that time, a distinctly Roman practice. Adoptions in Roman society were common, and the process was clearly delineated by law. They were most common among wealthy, connected, and powerful families, especially when an heir was needed to ensure retention of landed estates and wealth. Some of Rome’s most famous emperors, including Marcus Aurelius, were not born into their royal families but adopted into them as young children.<sup>2</sup> And, even when adoptions were privately arranged, the newly adopted persons would be brought into the forum, where their new families would publicly proclaim and own them as their fully legal children.<sup>3</sup>

As I think about the complexities of “being adopted,” I can imagine that it is, in a sense, like having a foot in two different worlds. I understand that children who are adopted, at some point, are likely to become curious about the circumstances of their birth. Where was I born? Who were my birth parents? And why did they feel like they had to give me up?

One of the ways adoptive families seek to reassure adopted children is to emphasize that they were special because they were “chosen.” That is a beautiful thing, but according to retired historian Dr. Mary Jo Wagner, that knowledge is still complicated, and sometimes it just doesn’t help that much. An orphan herself, she remembers attending in 1995 a reunion picnic of the Colorado State Home for Dependent and Neglected Children where some of her peers recalled the experience of being asked to stand in a line in their Sunday best -- with their faces scrubbed and hair perfectly combed – so that prospective adoptive parents could walk up and down, look them all over, and chose the child they wanted to take home. It was a “barbaric” and heartbreaking practice,” Wagner said, as those children knew that almost all of them would leave that line not feeling chosen, just rejected one more time.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://aleteia.org/2017/09/12/how-the-roman-practice-of-adoption-sheds-light-on-what-st-paul-was-talking-about/>

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.i.vii.ix.html>

“Fortunately,” she said, this procedure was terminated in 1971, and it “wasn’t part of my story.”<sup>4</sup>

It brings to mind a scene from the musical “Annie,” where all the little girls are struggling to fall asleep, all dreaming of a wonderful new family who is about to come and chose them...

*Betcha he reads, betcha she sews,  
Maybe she's made me a closet of clothes!  
Maybe they're strict, as straight as a line  
Don't really care As long as they're mine!*

*So maybe now it's time, And maybe when I wake  
They'll be there calling me baby... Maybe*

*So maybe now this prayer's the last one of its kind  
Won't you please come get your baby?*

This is essentially what Paul is talking about when he writes of the “spirit of slavery,” the sense that we are trapped in a strained and broken bondage to sin. We, as fallible human beings, are all waiting “*with eager longing*,” Paul says. We are waiting eagerly for God’s redemption and acceptance, hoping against hope that someday we will be chosen – that we will be able to truly call ourselves children of God. And isn’t that true for us? Isn’t there still a part of us that wonders, am I good enough? I can dress myself up and comb my hair, but I still don’t know... Am I good enough? Will I be chosen? Am I really part of God’s family?

Paul understands these emotions, because he has felt those same fears and felt that same longing. But he also wants us to understand that God is even now at work to pull us out of that spirit of bondage and slavery, and give us a new spirit – a spirit of being chosen, despite our imperfections -- “a spirit of adoption.”

And that spirit, Paul says, is full, complete, and permanent. It is no weak reed. In Roman culture, a child who was chosen for adoption was, for all intents and purposes, in the exact same position as a child born naturally into that family. With the adoption, everything that had been was instantly erased – any debts or obligations that the child may have owed through their birth family were immediately and completely extinguished. They may have been a slave before the adoption, but now, all wealth, all legal rights, all privileges, and every elevated status was instantly vested in the child. With the adoption, a completely new life had begun, and the child could never be disowned by their new family.

Paul assures us that this is not something for which we have to wait, but rather a blessing that we enjoy right now, in full. Even so, the sin and brokenness that we still perceive in this life often obscures that reality, and keeps us from living in the grace of this good news. One of the greatest sermons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century addresses this divided spirit that most of us feel.<sup>5</sup> According to Paul Tillich, we are torn between feelings of being rejected and being chosen. At times we feel like we are in bondage; at other times we feel a

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Jo Wagner, “The Chosen Baby,” <https://medium.com/illumination/the-chosen-baby-maryjo-wagner-b0acd5233893>, Jan. 29, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted.” *The Shaking of the Foundations*. New York: Scribner's (1948), p. 153.

glorious freedom. This is a natural condition for us, feeling partly within the family of God, but in some ways still a stranger.

The key, Tillich says, is for us to push ourselves to accept the grace that is being freely given to us by God. "In grace," he says, "something is overcome; grace occurs 'in spite of' something; grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement. Grace is the *reunion* of life with life, the *reconciliation* of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected."<sup>6</sup> In other words, grace reminds us that we truly are chosen. And the key advice that he gives us in that sermon is this: "***accept that you are accepted.***"

If we can do that, then we are likely to feel what Tillich felt as he read through this ancient letter to the church in Rome. In that moment, he says,

*"a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is [as] though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. **Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!**'"*

*If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition... nothing but **acceptance.**"<sup>7</sup>*

This is what Paul is talking about. This is the "spirit of adoption" – an acceptance that we really do have this jewel in our treasury right now – acceptance that we truly are part of God's family not sometime in an uncertain future, but at this very moment... that right here, and right now, God not only chooses us, but embraces us fully, loves us completely, and promises that this new family is forever... that no matter what may come, we will never be disinherited.

May God grant to us this ability to accept that we are accepted, both now and always. **Amen.**

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 156.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 162.