



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING

Adoption as Sons

GALATIANS 4:1-7

May 15, 2011

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

¹I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ²but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. ⁴But 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. ⁶And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Introduction

Did you know that a baby's cry matches its mother's language? A newborn child, only two or three days old, cries in a distinctive way, a way that mimics the sound of that child's mother. Researchers recently studied 60 healthy newborn children from French and German families. What they found was truly fascinating: each newborn baby has its own 'cry melody,' a specific pattern of sounds that is unique to their cry. But more than that, they found that babies match the sound of their crying to the sounds and intonations of their mother's voice.¹

However, I suspect none of the mother's needed a study to tell them something so obvious. From day one, you've known that to be true. That's why moms not only can hear their own baby's cry from miles away, but can also pick out their own baby crying even if there are other babies who could be crying. Moms, you've always know your baby has his or her own distinctive cry, haven't you?

But did you realize this is also true of God's children? They, too, have their own distinctive cry. God's children have a distinctive cry. And this passage tells us what it sounds like: "Abba! Father!" This is the distinctive cry of God's children.

This is also one of the great privileges of being a child of God. When God adopts you as a son or daughter, he sends his own Spirit into your heart, which causes you to cry, "Abba! Father!" (4:6). And it is this cry that identifies who you belong to, who your Father is. But it also clarifies for you, and for others who hear you cry, whether you are in fact a child of God.

¹ Cf. "Babies 'cry in mother's tongue," BBC News, 2009/11/06; accessed online.

You see, Paul realizes the Galatians have begun to doubt their status as God's children, and now are doubting whether they'll receive God's promised inheritance of eternal life. So Paul points to this distinctive cry as a way for them to confirm they are in fact sons of God. And, as he says, "if a son, then an heir through God" (4:7).

The Period of Enslavement (4:1-3)

Of course, the "if a son" implies that not everyone is a son. Therefore, not everyone makes this particular sound when they cry. If you're not a child of God, you don't make this sound. You'll still cry, of course; all children cry. But because God isn't your Father, when you cry, it sounds very different.

We see in this passage before where Paul talks about how God adopts children into his family, he first describes what it's like for them to be in the orphanage of the world. Prior to being adopted by God, it's a period of enslavement. And as his example Paul points to the children of Israel, not unlike what he did in the previous passage (cf. 3:23-25).

In particular, Paul recalls Israel's enslavement in Egypt. The point he wants to make is that as long as the children of Israel were enslaved, they were no different than slaves, that is, no different than any other nation or people. They had no more access to God's inheritance than anyone else. "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, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father" (4:1-2).

But notice what Paul goes on to say in the very next verse; it's both remarkable and provocative. "In the same way we also," he adds, "when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world" (4:3). What's he saying? His point is that Israel's period of enslavement didn't stop at the Exodus from Egypt. Instead, enslavement describes their entire history as a nation. Although the Exodus redeemed them from Egyptian slavery, they remained enslaved to something far worse: what Paul calls "the elementary principles of the world" (4:4).

What's Paul referring to with this intriguing phrase? He's referring to those basic elements of the created order, those primordial powers at work in the world, which fallen human beings turn into idols and worship as gods. What are those basic elements of our created order, those primordial powers at work in our world? Let me give you three, and you'll have a better understanding of what Paul is talking about: money, sex and power. These are elementary principles of the world; they are all around us, all the time, and everywhere. We cannot avoid them. But more than that, they are incredibly powerful; so powerful, in fact, that sinful creatures like you and me are constantly tempted to turn any one of these three into idols and then worship them as gods.

This is the Bible's verdict upon fallen humanity apart from the redeeming work of Christ and adoption into God's family: we are hopelessly enslaved to powers far beyond our own control. We see this to be true in the life of Israel, even when she was redeemed from Egyptian slavery. But we also see this among all the peoples of the earth. Listen to what Paul says of the Galatians because it's true of every one of us apart from Christ: "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods" (4:8).

Enslavement to those that by nature are not gods: that's the status of every single person apart from being adopted by God.

The Process of Adoption (4:4-5)

But, thankfully, it wasn't God's plan to leave fallen humanity in a permanent state of enslavement. God the Father was not content to let human beings simply languish in the orphanage of the world. Instead, his heart was set on adoption. "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" (4:4-5). You see, what God had in his heart was to create one new family out of all the families of the earth, and to create this family through adoption.

Now, as anyone knows who's adopted, an adoption is an extensive process, an intensive process, and, perhaps I should add, often an expensive process. First of all, an adoption involves lots of paperwork! It's also not something you want to rush into; the timing's got to be right. And your motives as adoptive parents have to be right, as well. You've got to be mentally and emotionally prepared to engage in this lengthy and taxing process. And, in the case of international adoption, you've also got to be prepared to travel, to go to the country of origin, stay there for some period of time, see the process to completion, and bring the child home. Adoption, then, like pregnancy itself, is not for the faint of heart!

Yet we need to understand that the process God went through to adopt his sons and daughters was even more extensive and intensive and expensive—vastly more so! You see, God waited patiently, not for many months, but for hundreds of years, until just the right time came, "when the fullness of time had come" (4:4). And then, and only then, did he initiate the adoption process.

But notice *how* the Father initiated the adoption process: "God sent forth his Son" (4:4). And here's why: the heavenly Father is a holy God and therefore could not simply take sinful creatures and call them his own without first dealing with their sin. This is why the Son was "born of woman, born under the law" (4:4). He not only had to take on human flesh, but he also had to come under *the curse of the law*. You see, in order to adopt sinful, fallen creatures like you and me, the Son not only had to become *incarnate*, he also had to be *crucified*, on the cross where he became for us a curse (cf. 3:13).

When Katie and I adopted Addis and Rager, it was indeed an extensive and intensive and expensive process. And we had to travel a remarkably long way to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, where Addis and Rager were. And then, once we were in country, there was still some more work to do; and it wasn't always easy or straightforward. But imagine if Katie and I would have sent our son Ezra to Ethiopia to adopt Addis and Rager. And just imagine if we knew that the only way we were going to be able to adopt Addis and Rager was by letting Ezra get publically executed while he was in Ethiopia. The only way to adopt the twins was to sacrifice our firstborn son. Yet, you see, that's precisely what God the Father did in sending his Son into the world and onto the cross; he did it "so that we might receive adoption as sons" (4:5).

If you are a son or a daughter of God, you're only that because of adoption. God went to great lengths to secure your adoption; he spared absolutely no expense. In fact, he paid the

highest price, in the giving of his own Son so that you could be made right with God and become one of his children by faith. Recognizing this, is it any wonder the Bible says to us: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God” (1 John 3:1).

The Privilege of Sonship (4:6)

To receive the adoption as sons—what a stunning and remarkable privilege! This sheer fact alone should thrill our hearts; and all the more when we understand more *the privilege* of being adopted into God’s family. Which is just where Paul takes us in the very next verse; in fact, he points to two privileges: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (v. 6).

You see, one of the privileges of divine adoption is *a change of nature*. Human adoptions don’t, of course, change a child’s nature; the change is legal and relational; there’s no transformation of the child’s nature. But when God adopts a person into his family, he changes their very nature; they become a new creature. They receive a whole new DNA; in fact, they receive God’s own DNA.

But how on earth does that happen? God changes your nature by sending the Spirit of his Son into your heart. And there, in the very core of your being, the Spirit of God remains and resides; he never goes away. But more than that, he completely transforms you, starting from the inside and working out.

This leads, then, to a second privilege of divine adoption, which is *a change of disposition*. Those with new DNA given by the Spirit of God express that changed nature in a changed disposition, toward both God and the circumstances of their lives. From the moment of their new birth, they begin to cry, just like newborn babies. However, theirs is a distinctive cry, because it flows from this new Spirit-given nature and disposition. It is a cry of intimacy and dependence; and this is what it sounds like: “Abba! Father!”

But what kind of cry is this? Well, who else cried this way: “Abba! Father!” The only other person who cries this way is Jesus. It is the cry he uttered in the Garden of Gethsemane. His final hour had come. He was staring death in the face. No doubt, he was also coming to terms with the suffering he was to endure on the cross. Therefore, his soul was in anguish; and at precisely that moment, this is what he said: “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

You see, the cry, “Abba! Father!” is *the Son’s way of addressing his Father in his time of greatest need*. Yes, this is a cry of intimacy and dependence; but it is also a cry—a response to pain, something one utters in the face of suffering or in the midst of hardship.

Yet because God sends the Spirit of Christ into every one of his adopted children’s hearts, they too learn to cry this same cry when they are in a time of need. Adopted sons cry out to their heavenly Father in the same way that God’s one and only Son did. In fact, the cry of an adopted child of God is the Son himself crying out to God for them and in them through his Spirit.

God's adopted children have, then, a very distinctive cry; they have a distinctive way of responding to life's challenges. The distinctive thing is not that God's children have fewer challenges than others. Nor is it that God's children don't grieve or experience disappointment as a result of the challenges that come their way. Instead, the distinctive thing about God's children is that when they cry, they make a different sound than those who aren't God's children. When faced with suffering, whether great or small, God's children turn to their heavenly Father to find intimacy and look to him in dependency; they cry out to him, "Abba! Father!" And by faith they fully expect that their heavenly Father not only will hear their cry, but wants to respond to their cry—and will respond. That's the distinctive sound of their cry.

How about you? Have you listened to yourself cry lately? What do you sound like when you are faced with difficulties or hardships or suffering or setbacks? If we played a tape recording of your most recent response to some difficulty in your life, what would we hear? Would we hear the sound, "Abba! Father!" Or would we hear something else: weeping, yes, but perhaps gnashing of teeth as well?

All too often the children of God get into difficulties in life and start to cry, as well they should, but it's not the distinctive cry of his adopted sons and daughters. Instead, it sounds like the cry of those who don't know God as their Father. It's therefore not the cry of intimacy and dependence; instead, it's the cry of indignation and desperation: "What am I going to do?!" Or, "How can God do this to me?!"

God's children don't gnash their teeth at their heavenly Father. Even when they receive a heavy blow in life, they don't curse the day they were born, much less curse the God who made them. Nor do they cry the way the world does: blaming themselves or others or God; suffocating under a sense of guilt and shame; or redoubling their efforts to work harder to get themselves out of this mess. No, God's children look to their heavenly Father in faith, and cry out to him, "Abba! Father!"

The Promise of Heirs (4:7)

Notice, finally, then, how this passage concludes. Paul brings this passage, indeed, this whole section of Galatians (3:1-4:7) to a climax here in this final verse. Here he affirms the very point he's been working so hard to establish throughout the letter thus far, the heart of what the Galatians need to become convinced of again: "So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God" (4:7).

These Gentile converts in Galatia, they aren't slaves, despite what they may have been told by those stirring up trouble in their midst. No, they're genuine sons of the God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel, the God of the nations! And they themselves *ought to know it*—because God has sent the Spirit of his Son into their hearts and now they respond to the challenges in their lives in a distinctive way. They have a distinct cry, and it is this distinctive cry that confirms they are indeed God's children. And if they are God's children, then they are heirs through God.

You see, then, the wonderful way in which God has connected suffering and sonship. *We are assured of our sonship by the way we respond to our suffering.* So, then, friend, don't begrudge the suffering God brings into your life—whether large or small—because those

are God-ordained occasions to confirm your adoption as sons of God. “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Heb. 12:7-8).

No, of course, no one likes discipline at the time; this isn’t a call to be happy in the midst of your hardships. But it is a call to walk by faith in the midst of them, knowing that later discipline will yield “the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:11).

Are you struggling right now? Are you heavy-laden with some hardship or difficulty? Perhaps it’s the Father’s loving discipline: not to pay you back for being a naughty child, but to cultivate greater holiness in your heart as his beloved son or daughter.

So, then, don’t begrudge the suffering God sends you. Instead, rejoice in the very core of your being that you are indeed a son or daughter of the loving heavenly Father. And see the hardship as an occasion through which God will increase your confidence in being an heir.

Conclusion

Every newborn baby has its own distinctive cry. So, too, do the children of God. And you know you’re a child of God, when you cry in a certain way; you know you’ve been adopted into God’s family, when you respond to the circumstances in your life with the cries of intimacy and dependence; you know you are a son or a daughter of God, when you look to your heavenly Father in time of need with confidence and trust; you know you’re his when you find yourself crying out, “Abba! Father!”

This isn’t something you manufacture or muster in your own strength; no, this distinctive cry of the children of God is something God himself causes to well up within you by his Spirit—the Spirit of his Son—whom he sends into your heart when he adopts you as his child. And it is how you know you’ve been adopted; this is how you know you are a child of God. And if you are a child of God, then you are an heir through God.

Amen.

© May 15, 2011 by Dr. Todd A. Wilson