

Introduction

Do you pray for your children? If so, what do you ask God to do for them? My prayers for my children and grandchildren are directed primarily towards their spiritual welfare. Over my lifetime, my intercessions for them have included a wide variety of requests, often dictated by the need of the hour. But if I were to condense my prayers for them into one short petition, it would run something like this:

'Heavenly Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I ask that all my children and grandchildren will be adopted into your family and will know that they are secure in your love.'

You may ask why I choose the blessing of adoption as being the most important. It is because adoption embraces all the other blessings of the gospel which, considered by themselves, do not so well convey the whole truth to our minds and do not provide a sufficient ground for the assurance of eternal life.

The Empire State Building in New York is held together by a framework of steel weighing sixty thousand tons. We cannot see it because it is overlaid by ten million bricks. And *yet* it is the vital part of the building. Without it, the entire structure would collapse.

God's greatest blessing

Now let us think of the entire building as representing the gospel. First, think of the solid foundation as justification (being put into a right relationship with God) because it is the basis upon which the gospel is built. If we are not justified by faith there can be no building.

If we then think of the building in process of erection, the walls will represent our sanctification (growth in holiness). As each brick is added, the building slowly rises in conformity with the heavenly Architect's plan. The steady growth is plain for all to see. Since the aerials and flagpole on top of the building point heavenwards we can picture them as standing for our glorious hope.

Where does the invisible steel framework fit in to this picture? Since it holds everything together and makes sense of the entire construction, it must surely represent our adoption. Why? Because what the Scriptures teach about adoption relates to every aspect of gospel truth and therefore, holds it together.

Speaking from experience, after being a servant of God for seventy-three years and having had a close relationship with many Christians, I have yet to meet one who has truly plumbed the depths of joy in fellowship with God and his children without having also fully understood and applied what the Scriptures teach about adoption.

Sadly, however, the majority of Christian believers seem to see adoption as an aspect of the gospel that is not very important – at least not as important as the great doctrines of repentance, the new birth, justification by faith and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The fact that adoption is the key that enables us to understand how all the other aspects of the gospel relate to each other is not appreciated.

Later, we shall seek to substantiate this claim by taking a close look at Paul's teaching. No other New Testament writer deals with the subject of adoption in such detail. Indeed, we can say with confidence that adoption gives us the best insight into Paul's mind. With a thorough grasp of his teaching on the subject, the breath-taking privileges of God's children come into much clearer focus and that must be of great benefit to any believer.

To put all this in negative form – if adoption is not at the centre of our understanding of the gospel we shall have difficulty in seeing how various truths relate to each other. Inability to fully appreciate the ultimate purpose of God's scheme of redemption will be the inevitable result.

But before we go into more detail, let me say briefly what Christian adoption is. When the Scriptures refer to this great privilege we are not to think of it as we think about human adoption – the transfer of a child from one human family to another – which time will bring to an end. Rather, we should see it as the transfer of someone from the family of Satan to the family of God – a relationship that will last forever. In God's family, adoption is not beset with any of the disadvantages that can and often do spoil adoption into a human family.

For example, human adoption cannot confer natural sonship on the person who is adopted. Since he was not born into the family he can never be anything other than adopted. As a result, just as his new father may find it hard to regard the new member as one of his own, so also the adopted person will not always find it easy to relate to his new father as 'dad'.

God's greatest blessing

Those who are adopted into God's family do not suffer these handicaps because they are born anew of the Spirit. This means that they receive the Spirit of Christ who enables them to call God Father just as naturally and spontaneously as they would their human dad. 'Because you are sons,' says Paul, 'God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts' (Gal. 4:6).

Now, to whet your appetite, let us take a quick look at how all this works out in practice. When we speak of God's plan of redemption we are thinking about his method of saving his chosen people. This plan was drawn up between the Persons of the Holy Trinity before the world was made.

If we ask for a definition of God's purpose in the redemption of his children, we cannot do better than to turn to the words of Paul: 'God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons' (Gal. 4:5). It is obvious from this statement that Christians were redeemed in order to be adopted.

Being put right with God (Justification) is, perhaps, the best example of an important Christian doctrine that in itself does not tell us much about other equally important aspects of the gospel. We learn that the only way to be justified in God's eyes is by faith and that God is able to justify his children without violating his own standard of justice. Understanding justification alone however, is like being healed of a dreadful disease and not knowing what to do with ourselves. To change the metaphor, we are all dressed up in new clothes but have nowhere to go! If we want to make progress from here, we need to know why we have been justified.

Chapter twelve of the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it like this: 'All those who are justified God graciously guarantees to make partakers of the grace of adoption in and for his only Son, Jesus Christ. By this act they are taken into the number of God's children and enjoy the liberties and privileges of that relationship.'

Our new birth (Regeneration) brings us into a new and living relationship with our Heavenly Father and also with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Both they and we, according to the apostle Peter, now 'participate in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4). What a breath-taking thought this is! Again, it is not easy to grasp if we do not see it as the means whereby we become members of God's redeemed family.

The same applies to our sanctification too – our necessary growth in holiness. The purpose of this growth is to make us more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ so that we fulfil our calling to 'share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light' (Col. 1:12). Our growth in holiness, therefore, takes place in fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In other words, understanding adoption helps us to see that our sanctification is not a lonely process but takes place in the context of our new family. Sanctification is God's purpose for each member. We are predestined to be adopted as his sons with the express purpose of being made holy and blameless in his sight.

We know from Scripture that God uses our sufferings and the trials and tribulations of this life to train us in holy living. He also uses our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom may not be easy to get on with.

Admission into God's family (adoption) is, therefore, the greatest privilege known to man. To have heaven-sent confidence to call the Almighty God 'Our Father' is beyond description. But it is, or ought to be, the day-to-day experience of all who know Jesus Christ as Saviour. It is in this living confidence that our hope of glory is strengthened.

I hope you will now understand why I pray that my children will know what Biblical adoption is all about. By this God-appointed means, I pray that each one of them will grow strong in the faith, attain a deep assurance of eternal life and so learn what a privilege it is to be a child of God.

It does not follow from this, however, that they will be sure of their privileged status. The fact and the assurance of the fact are two different things, often separated in Christian experience. And those who lack assurance also lack the joy of that daily realisation that we are now God's children for ever. Those readers who have a strong assurance of their new status will readily agree with me that there is no greater joy in this life.

Since I am writing this as an old man by any standards, you may be tempted to think that because this life is almost over for me, I am no longer very interested in it. It is therefore, natural for me to think the blessings of this life are no longer very important. You would be wrong! I am more interested in this life than I have ever been. But my many years of experience in this world have qualified me to make an assessment of the relative value of the blessings that end with death and those that don't. I do not have the slightest doubt which is best. In any case, I have been of this opinion since I was a youth.

Now when I ponder the amazing privilege of adoption, I am astonished that it should be a neglected subject in the church today. Since, as I have explained, it is the only doctrine that embraces every aspect of the gospel, this is a great loss. As in all my books, I try to awaken believers to the greatness of their privileges and this one is no exception.

If, therefore, you are a believer who knows beyond reasonable doubt that God has forgiven all your sins, but that is as far as you have progressed, it is to you that I write. You may have some understanding of the magnitude of God's grace, but perhaps adoption has always been regarded by you as a peripheral doctrine and therefore unimportant. Why should you go about your daily life not being convinced that you are a child of God and a brother of the King of kings?

Someone who is not a Christian may pick up this book and begin reading. To that person I would say that first of all, you must accept that, as an unbeliever, you will not be able to understand it because you do not have the Spirit of God. The apostle Paul writes: 'The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned' (1 Cor. 2:14). Please notice that Paul does not say that the man without the Spirit will not understand them but that he cannot. If the reader feels himself to be in this sad condition, the best advice I can give him is this – ask God in his mercy to open your blind eyes.

Finally, I want to assure the reader that I am aware of the on-going debate about the origins of Paul's teaching on adoption. Since my intention is to help believers in the Christian life, I believe I can do this without trying to

determine to what extent Paul was influenced by his Greek/Roman background. Therefore, I shall not spend too much time considering it.

The claim that Bible scholars are awakening to the usefulness of insights into the practices of adoption in the old world and how they help us to understand the New Testament may be true to some extent. But I do not accept that those Christians who are ignorant of these things are in any way handicapped. The Scriptures are sufficient of themselves to enable the believer to rejoice in its truth, with or without academic training.