

The Letter Of Paul To The Ephesians

*⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.
(Ephesians 1:7-10. ESV)*

Message 4

Every Spiritual Blessing - Adoption

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Ephesians 1:5-6

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles to Ephesians 1:5-6. You recall that the Apostle Paul has been carried away as it were into an extended reflection on just how gracious and generous God has been to us in Christ with respect to our redemption. He attempted a liturgical eulogy which was supposed to be a single sentence ascribing praise to God on the basis of his redemptive acts. A normal eulogy is around 25 words – Paul’s is well over 200 words. He gets excited and he begins to unpack what he means by “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”. Last week we talked about election which Paul presents as the immediate cause of all of our other blessings. We only have all that we have because GOD CHOSE US – we didn’t earn these blessings, there was nothing in us that warranted this generosity – God chose us according to the counsel of his will before the foundation of the world. That got Paul excited and it ought to get you excited. Now he begins to unpack some of these blessings that have resulted from the gracious election of God. He starts with adoption and we’ll be talking about that today. Let me read to you from God’s Holy and inspired Word.

⁵he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:5-6. ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

I want to begin with everything Paul says around this word adoption, then we'll look at the word itself and the Old Testament background so that we can understand how Paul is using it and then we'll end by summarizing exactly what Paul is saying we have received in Christ because of God's gracious election of us in the Beloved. So let's look very carefully now at verses 5-6. Paul is framing this nugget. He wants to make sure we don't charge off in the wrong direction here and I want us to see how he does that. Let's look at the frame first; he says that adoption – whatever that is for now...

Framing our discussion of “adoption”

Adoption is....

1. Emphatically NOT due to any worth or merit in us

Look again at verse 5-6:

⁵he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:5-6. ESV)

This new status we enjoy as the sons of God – and I'm using “son” here not in the sense of “male child” but rather in the sense of “principle heir” – we'll get to that in a minute – this exalted status is emphatically NOT due to any observed worth in us. God didn't go to the orphanage of humanity and pick out the best and the brightest and the most suitable and say “I'll take those” – no! A thousand times no. It would be difficult to imagine how Paul could have been anymore clear about that in this passage. I tried to imagine how it could be made more clear and I couldn't make it more clear without it becoming outright rude. It might have been more clear if Paul said: “You all are nasty, ugly, ignorant, worthless people and YET God chose you and made you his beloved children.” That's about the only way this could have been more clear but then it would have been rude and so Paul went right up to that line and stopped. Elsewhere he goes a little further with people who maybe were a little slower on the uptake. To the Corinthians he said:

²⁶For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰He is the

source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. ³¹Therefore, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-31. ESV)

Not that is almost rude isn't it? He says that you were kind of ignorant, weak, lowly, foolish and generally despised but God chose you so that no human being may boast in the presence of the Lord. Whatever Paul means by adoption it is emphatically clear that he does not mean that we have earned sonship or that we were chosen on the basis of some form of personal merit or worth. Adoption is from election, according to the counsel of God's secret will and unto the praise of his grace. People are going to look at you and know right away “this is a grace case”. God didn't choose this one because he was handsome or strong or smart, this is a grace case if ever there was one. You're a grace case. I'm a grace case. We're not beauty pageant winners, we're not smarter or better or more naturally inclined to faith and piety. If anything, God chose us because of our weakness, because of our helplessness, because our utter lostness and depravity provided an excellent canvas for a display of his mercy and grace. Whatever else adoption is, it has to be that or its not part of the Christian Gospel.

Secondly adoption is:

2. Through Jesus Christ

Look again at the text:

⁵he predestined us for adoption **through Jesus Christ**.

Paul is so wonderfully and completely unconcerned with classical style and I appreciate that as a pastor. Paul gets criticised sometimes for being repetitive and one of the things you will notice as you read this letter is that he is constantly inserting repetitive reminders so that his people never forget that all of these blessings we are talking about have been granted us THROUGH CHRIST. He is very concerned lest the focus shift from the blesser TO THE BLESSINGS! Isn't that absolutely critical church? Think how easy it is for North American Evangelicals to turn Christianity into a religion about BLESSING instead of a religion about THE BLESSER. Paul won't let us go down that road and so every verse or two he will slip in one of these “in Christ” or as here “through Christ”. That is good pastoring right there. Let's not skip over it and let's not assume we don't need that. Paul is bringing our attention back to the ACCOMPLISHMENT

of our redemption. Theologians talk about redemption in terms of its accomplishment and its application. Application refers to how all of what Christ earned is APPLIED to our lives. How we become sons and heirs and temples of the Holy Spirit and holy and powerful and all those wonderful things that we rightly get excited about. That's application but Paul wants to remind us of how this redemption was accomplished. That's the story of Jesus Christ and what he did to earn for us so great a salvation. Let me commend to you John Murray's fabulous little book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* for a full length treatment of this – you can pick it up in Guest Central if you don't have it – but for now let me just read to you from our own Church Family Catechism. We teach this stuff to our kids but we need to make sure we know it too. There are two questions on page 12 that explain what Paul is saying by “through Christ”.

1. What did the eternal Son of God do for His people? (page 12)
 - a. Christ, the Son of God, became man in order to obey and suffer for us.
2. How did Jesus Christ redeem His people? (page 12)
 - a. He kept the whole law for His people and suffered the punishment their sins deserved; our propitiation.

This is not just for children. You must never forget that all of these blessings were accomplished for you because Jesus Christ, the Son of God became a man in order to obey and suffer for us. He kept the whole law for His people and suffered the punishment their sins deserved; our propitiation. That's how you came to be sons and daughters of Almighty God. Whatever else adoption is, it is first, foremost and forever THROUGH Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, adoption is

3. Unto the praise of his glorious grace

Look at the text again:

⁵he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶**to the praise of his glorious grace**, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:5-6. ESV)

Paul uses that phrase 3 times in this extended eulogy; he uses it here and then again in verse 12 and 14. Paul is telling us where this is all headed. All of these blessings flow out of God's gracious election and they are all headed toward the end that is the end of all things – after all,

what is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. Here Paul is a little more specific, he says that this election unto adoption as sons is unto the praise of his glorious grace.

If I can make a bit of an analogy here, we have often talked about how “glorifying God” is akin to putting God back at the centre of our universe. God is like the sun and he is the biggest thing and he is the source of all life and light and health and therefore the solar system works really well when he is at the centre but because of human pride and rebellion we like to put ourselves at the centre and because our hearts are idol factories as Luther said, we often like to put other, smaller things at the centre and to treat them as larger than they were meant to be. Some of us put our wives at the centre or our kids or our jobs or our health. All of those things are good things but they are smaller things than God and when we put them at the centre the solar system of our life begins to wobble and to implode and things start crashing into one another and its chaos. To glorify God is to put him back at the centre. To make him the centre and focus of our adoration, loyalty and love. To glorify his grace is to acknowledge that what flows from God to us when God is at the centre is the source of all our life and light and health. The grace of God is like the rays of the sun. It comes out from the centre and restores all life to health and proper flourishing. That’s what Paul is saying here. God has done a work in our hearts. He chose us, he changed us, he started speaking to us through the Spirit of adoption inside of us and he has put himself back at the centre of our solar system and he has literally brought us back to life by the flow of his grace into our hearts. People are going to look at us and at what God does in us and they are not going to praise us they are going to praise God and they are going to say: “Truly God is merciful, truly he is powerful, truly his Word is right and leads to life. Truly God is a gracious God.” That’s where this is going.

Lastly in terms of the frame, we need to understand that the blessing of adoption is ours:

4. In the Beloved

Now again this may seem repetitive, Paul has already said that the blessing of adoption has been accomplished through Christ so why does he need to say that it is ours IN Christ which is of course what he means by “In the Beloved” – Jesus is the Beloved Son of God – God the Father said that at his baptism. So why does Paul say that the blessing of adoption is ours IN CHRIST or IN THE BELOVED? This goes back to what Paul said in verse 3; look there again:

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3. ESV)

Jesus Christ is not just the AGENT of blessing – though he is that – he is also the SPHERE of blessing – I mentioned that two weeks ago. All of these blessings are available now but only to those who are IN CHRIST. You see it's possible that you could be hearing all of this – you could hear how Jesus accomplished redemption and how now all of these blessings are available to us and you might go home quite confident and satisfied without actually wrestling with the issue of whether you are in fact IN CHRIST. It is not enough to simply know how Jesus accomplished our redemption. You could have the whole catechism memorized and not have a personal share in any of what it is talking about. You have to be PERSONALLY IN CHRIST. You see redemption was accomplished HISTORICALLY – meaning once and for all – but it has to be APPLIED PERSONALLY – meaning person by person through faith. If you do not have a personal – not private mind you – but personal relationship with Christ - meaning you, not your momma or your grandma but you – if you have not repented of your sins and put faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour then NONE of what we've been talking about applies to you. Jesus accomplished all of these blessings for us and they are available to anyone who would come to him in repentance and faith but they are not applied universally they are applied personally to those who are IN CHRIST by faith. Whatever else adoption is, it is only true of those who are Beloved IN CHRIST.

That's the frame. Whatever adoption is, whatever that word would have automatically meant to the people who heard it read to them, Paul wants them to understand that it is emphatically not due to any worth or merit in them, that it is through Jesus Christ, that it is unto the praise of his glorious grace and it is experienced only by those who are IN THE BELOVED, that is united to Christ through faith. Now if we were first century Greek speaking, Old Testament reading people that's probably where the sermon would end, but we're not. We're 21st century English speaking Biblically illiterate – by and large – people and so we need to do a little bit more homework to make sure we have this down. We need to look at the word itself and then at the Old Testament background which would have provided the context and meaning for Paul's hearers.

Let's start with the word adoption.

Defining "adoption"

The Greek word Paul uses here is υιοθεσία (pronounced *hwee-oth-es-ee'-ah*) which is a compound word made up of the word for "son" and the word for "to place". That is why it is usually translated as "adoption as sons". It was a technical term for the choice of an heir that was not actually a biological son. In the Greco-Roman world this was very common. If a wealthy man did not have a son of his own, or in some cases, if his son was a drunk or just not mentally able to run the family estate and business, then the wealthy man might adopt a servant or some other associate who would become his legal heir and son in every sense of the word. Adoption in the Greco-Roman world was a very different thing than what we think of as adoption today. We tend to think of babies when we hear the word adoption but in the Greco-Roman world the majority of people who were adopted were grown men. So when Paul says that we have been adopted by God – think inheritance, think family business, think slave become son. That's the cultural frame of reference.

Secondly in terms of understanding the word adoption we have to get into the narrative of the Old Testament. Paul in using this word in his letter to the Ephesians is assuming a familiarity with the Greco-Roman world and also a familiarity with the Jewish Old Testament. There are two texts in particular that we have to understand to catch what they would have instinctively caught, look first at Exodus 4:22:

²²Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, **Israel is my firstborn son,** ²³and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'" (Exodus 4:22-23. ESV)

So God has a first born son as it were. The Israelites are like the true born children of God and yet there appears to be a problem with these children:

² Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:
**"Children have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.**

³ The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand."

⁴ Ah, sinful nation,
a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
they are utterly estranged. (Isaiah 1:2-4. ESV)

One of the major problems in the Old Testament is that the children of God by election – the Jews – have become estranged from God. They despised him, they forsook him. God has a problem with his trueborn sons and so when you hear about “adoption” in the first century Greco-Roman world and when you hear it through the lens of the Old Testament problem of God’s estrangement from his true-born sons – you hear that as news that you, though a Gentile have been brought inside and included among the chosen people of God. Does this help you understand other parallel teachings in the New Testament? Think of what Paul says in Romans 11; speaking to “you Gentiles”, Paul says:

¹⁷But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. (Romans 11:17-21. ESV)

Do you see the obvious parallels now? Paul says to these Gentiles: “You are like wild olive branches that have been grafted on to a tree because the natural branches were not yielding fruit.” He goes on to say that God may do a work of grace with the natural branches and graft them back on – so don’t be proud, don’t be arrogant – rather stand in awe and hold fast in faith.

These Gentiles were being told by the Apostle Paul that they too had been elected. God chose Israel, yes – but Israel is not in a place right now to be the sons of God – God may change that, that’s a sermon for another day – but you – you who were not a people have been made God’s people; you who were far off have been brought near and made sons! Joint heirs with Jesus and SONS of the Living God! That is pretty exciting news.

Let me conclude then by summarizing what we have learned, we’re ready to organize all of this into a few concise points. When Paul says that one of our spiritual blessings in Christ is ADOPTION he is saying that by God’s grace we have been given the following:

Unpacking The Grace Of Adoption

1. **Intimate relationship**
2. **Fatherly discipline**
3. **Abundant inheritance**
4. **Glorious vocation**

That's what is inside that box. Paul's readers would have heard that much easier than we did because they were immersed in Greco-Roman culture and they were fluent in the stories of the Old Testament – we needed some help – but all of us have access to the same box in Christ and this is what is inside of that box. Good things! Glorious things! Heavenly things are in that box for us because of Jesus Christ. Let me end by just briefly introducing you to each of these wonderful things.

The first thing and maybe the most precious is the intimate relationship that is ours now as sons and daughters of God the Father. As I mentioned two weeks ago all of these blessings are Trinitarian blessings. They are from the Father, because of the Son by means of the Holy Spirit. So it is here. Look at Romans 8:15-17:

¹⁵For 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!” ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and 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 8:15-17. ESV)

In Romans 8:15-17 Paul is saying that when we are saved the Holy Spirit floods into our hearts and the first thing he does is to open an intimate dialogue with God the Father. He cries out “Abba! Father!” Can't you just picture that? The Holy Spirit pops up in our hearts and cries out: “Father God! Father God! Over here Father God! Here is your son, here is your daughter and she has something she wants to say Father, please come and listen.” And he does. Isn't that beautiful? That is what you have now because of Christ.

Secondly we have the gift of fatherly discipline. You may not think that is a good thing but it is. I love how John Murray puts it in his chapter on adoption in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. He says:

“When God adopts men and women into his family he insures that not only may they have the rights and privileges of his sons and daughters but also the nature or disposition consonant with such a status. ... God never has in his family those who are alien to its atmosphere and spirit and station.” (John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied; p. 133.)

What’s he saying there? He’s saying exactly what Hebrews 12 says:

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

⁷It 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? ⁸If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (Hebrews 12:6-7. ESV)

Often as a pastor I have had people come to me shortly after making a profession of faith and they’ll say: “Pastor! I don’t know what has been happening. Ever since I made a profession of faith bad things have been happening to me! I thought everything would get better after coming to Christ but everything has gotten harder – what is going on Pastor?” The answer is simple: God is treating you as a son. He is disciplining you. He is training you by discipline to be a son of God in the image of THE Son of God. So that’s good news. God has saved and is now sanctifying you by one degree of glory to the next. Praise God.

Thirdly, part of the gift of adoption is the certainty of abundant inheritance. We already read about that in Romans 8 where Paul says:

¹⁷and 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 8:15-17. ESV)

We’ll talk more about this in a few weeks but for now just think on the fact that whatever God intends to give to Jesus Christ for all eternity will also be shared by you and by me with all the saints in glory. If that doesn’t fire you up then there is something seriously wrong with you. Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod, I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God!

Lastly, part of the wonderful gift that is ours in adoption is the gift of a glorious vocation. This would have been very obvious to Paul’s original readers and would likely have been understood as the primary point that he was making. To be a “son” in those days was of course to be included in the family business. Men adopted grown men as their sons not simply to enjoy their

company but rather and principally to pass on to them the family business. If you owned a vineyard and produced wine and you had no son you would adopt a son and you would teach him the vineyard business so that one day when you passed on you could leave the business in his stewardship. Sons in those days DID VOCATIONALLY what their fathers did. Understanding that aspect of sonship allows us to make sense of the conclusion to the Beatitudes for example. Jesus says in Matthew 5:

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9. ESV)

Jesus is saying that people will recognize us as the sons of God when we begin to get involved in the family business. God is in the business of making peace through the cross of Jesus Christ. When we take that as our business then we shall be called the sons of God. Understand this my friend: God chose you from before the foundation of the world not just to save you FROM HELL – he did that – but more than that he chose you from before the foundation of the world unto a business and a mission. He chose you UNTO the family business of reconciliation. The Great Commission is an invitation into the family business of peace making through the life and death of Jesus Christ. Paul says in 2 Corinthians:

¹⁸All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18-19. ESV)

If you are in Christ then you are in the business of reconciliation. I don't care whether you are a butcher, a baker or a candlestick maker – all of that is just location now, you are in the business of reconciling the world to God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. That's our Father's business and that is your business now as a beloved and adopted son.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. And all God's adopted children said, amen. Let's praise his name together.