

Set Up to Be a Son

Ephesians 1:3-5

(NKJV) 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will,

While the present author would not be at all dogmatic in his interpretation, and not even sure that he is right, he leans to the opinion that the words “in love” are to be construed with “predestinated”. The verb “chosen” (selected out) is too remote from the words “in love,” and the word “predestinated,” so near, that it would seem to decide the case for, “in love having predestinated.” *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*

Predestination is never used in reference to unsaved people. God has never predestinated anybody to be lost. If you are lost, it is because you have rejected God’s remedy. It is like a dying man to whom the doctor offers curing medicine. “If you take this, it’ll heal you.” The man looks at the doctor in amazement and says, “I don’t believe you.” Now the man dies and the doctor’s report says he died of a certain disease, and that’s accurate. But may I say to you, there was a remedy, and he actually died because he didn’t take the remedy. God has provided a remedy. *J. Vernon McGee, Thru the Bible Commentary:*

The verb itself means “to mark out the boundary or limits” of any place or thing. When used of persons, it means “to put limitations upon that person,” thus, “to determine his destiny.” *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*

For destined RV has ‘foreordained’; the Greek *proorisas* means literally ‘marked out beforehand’. It is simply another word that expresses the fact that God’s plan for his people is from eternity. That plan is, as AV literally renders it, ‘the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself’. Men and women were created for life in fellowship with God, as children with the Father (Gen. 1:26; Acts 17:28). By sin that privilege was forfeited, but by grace, in and through Christ, restoration to sonship is made possible (John 1:12). Adoption is the best way to describe this (cf. Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5), because adopted children have their position by grace and not by right, and yet are brought into the family on the same footing as children by birth. *Tyndale Commentaries - Tyndale New Testament Commentaries – Ephesians.*

In the N.T., it is always used of God as determining from eternity, sometimes with the further definition ‘before the age’ (I Cor. 2:7)—decreeing to do something (Acts 4:28); foreordaining things or persons (I Cor. 2:7, Rom. 8:29); or as here, appointing one beforehand to something. *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament*

The writers of the Old Testament only referred to God as Father fourteen times in the huge corpus of its thirty-nine books—and these rather impersonally. In those fourteen occurrences of "Father," the term was always used with reference to the nation and not individuals. But when Jesus came on the scene, he addressed God only as Father. The Gospels record Jesus using

"Father" more than sixty times in reference to God. He never used any other term except when quoting Psalm 22 on the cross. *Preaching the Word - Preaching the Word – Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*.

The term adoption is filled with the ideas of love, grace, compassion, and intimate relationship. It is the action by which a husband and wife decide to take a boy or girl who is not their physical offspring into their family as their own child. When that action is taken by the proper legal means, the adopted child attains all the rights and privileges of a member of the family. *MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Mark 9-16*.

Election and predestination do not indicate the same thing. Election is God's selection of individuals, while predestination is His plan and purpose for those whom He selects. *Lewis Sperry Chafer, The Ephesian Letter (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1935), 37–38*.

Adoption is the act of God by which He gives His "born ones" an adult standing in the family. Why does He do this? So that we might immediately begin to claim our inheritance and enjoy our spiritual wealth! A baby cannot legally use this inheritance (Gal. 4:1-7), but an adult son can—and should! *Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Volume 2*.

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The first adoption recorded in Scripture was that of Moses. When Pharaoh ordered all the male Hebrew children slain, Moses' mother placed him in a waterproof basket and set him in the Nile River among some reeds. When Pharaoh's daughter came to the river with her maids to bathe, she saw the basket and had one of her maids retrieve it. She immediately realized the infant was Hebrew but took pity on him. Moses' sister, Miriam, had been watching nearby and she offered to find a nursemaid for the child, as her mother had instructed. With the approval of Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam brought her own mother, who was then paid to take Moses home and nurse him. When Moses was a young boy he was brought to the palace and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter (see Ex. 2:1-10).

Because Esther's parents had died, she was adopted by an older cousin named Mordecai, who loved her as a father and took special care to look after her welfare (see Esther 2:5-11).

Perhaps the most touching adoption mentioned in the Old Testament was that of Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan and the sole remaining descendent of Saul. When King David learned about Mephibosheth, he gave him all the land that had belonged to his grandfather Saul and honored this son of his dearest friend, Jonathan, by having him dine regularly at the king's table in the palace at Jerusalem (see 2 Sam. 9:1-13).

Pharaoh's daughter adopted Moses out of pity and sympathy. And although Mordecai dearly loved Esther, his adoption of her was also prompted by family duty. But David's adoption of Mephibosheth was motivated purely by gracious love. In many ways, David's adoption of

Mephibosheth pictures God's adoption of believers. David took the initiative in seeking out Mephibosheth and bringing him to the palace. And although Mephibosheth was the son of David's closest friend, he was also the grandson and sole heir of Saul, who had sought repeatedly to kill David. Being crippled in both feet, Mephibosheth was helpless to render David any significant service; he could only accept his sovereign's bounty. The very name Mephibosheth means "a shameful thing," and he had lived for a number of years in Lo-debar, which means "the barren land" (lit., "no pasture"). David brought this outcast to dine at his table as his own son and graciously granted him a magnificent inheritance to which he was no longer legally entitled.

That is a beautiful picture of the spiritual adoption whereby God graciously and lovingly seeks out unworthy men and women on His own initiative and makes them His children, solely on the basis of their trust in His true Son, Jesus Christ. Because of their adoption, believers will share the full inheritance of the Son. To all Christians God declares, "'I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me,' says the Lord Almighty" (2 Cor. 6:17-18). Paul gives us the unspeakably marvelous assurance that God has "predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will" Eph. 1:5).

For some people today the concept of adoption carries the idea of second-class status in the family. In the Roman culture of Paul's day however, an adopted child, especially an adopted son, sometimes had greater prestige and privilege than the natural children. According to Roman law, a father's rule over his children was absolute. If he was disappointed in his natural sons' skill, character, or any other attribute, he would search diligently for a boy available for adoption who demonstrated the qualities he desired. If the boy proved himself worthy the father would take the necessary legal steps for adoption. At the death of the father, a favored adopted son would sometimes inherit the father's title, the major part of the estate, and would be the primary progenitor of the family name. Because of its obvious great importance, the process of Roman adoption involved several carefully prescribed legal procedures. The first step totally severed the boy's legal and social relationship to his natural family and the second step placed him permanently into his new family. In addition to that, all of his previous debts and other obligations were eradicated, as if they had never existed. For the transaction to become legally binding, it also required the presence of seven reputable witnesses, who could testify if necessary, to any challenge of the adoption after the father's death.

MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Mark 9-16.

V. ADOPTION

Our adoption into the family of God is another benefit of the death of Christ.

A. The Meaning of Adoption

Adoption is the act of God that places the believer in His family as an adult. In contrast, being born again emphasizes the idea of coming into God's family as a babe with the attendant need for growth and development (John 1:12; 3:3). But adoption teaches the ideas of adulthood and full privileges in the family of God. Concomitant with adoption is the divesting of all relationships and responsibilities of the previous family relationship. Both being adopted and being born occur at

the moment of saving faith, but they indicate different aspects of our relation to the family of God.

B. The Background of Adoption

Most cultures had some practice akin to adoption. Moses, a slave, was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter in Egypt. The Nuzu tablets reveal a custom whereby a childless couple could adopt a son who would serve them in life and be their heir in death. Hebrew laws did not include one that concerned adoption, and the Greek word for adoption does not occur in the Septuagint. This was probably due to the law of levirate marriage, which provided a way for a family to have heirs to inherit the family property. Polygamy may also have been another way to overcome the problems of childlessness.

Adoption was a very common aspect of Greco-Roman life, and this is the background of the New Testament concept. Childless couples would often adopt a son, who then became their heir. Even if the adopted son had living biological parents, they had no more claim over him after the adoption had taken place. Often parents were willing to let their sons be adopted by another family if it meant a better lot in life.

C. The Pauline Doctrine of Adoption

The doctrine is exclusively Pauline, and he used the term five times (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5).

1. The adoption of Israel as a nation (Rom 9:4). See also Exodus 4:22.
2. The adoption of believers as individuals. This act of God was predestined (Eph. 1:5) so that it may be said that God's predetermined plan included our destiny as adopted sons. It was made possible by the death of Christ (Gal. 4:5). It happened when we believed and became part of the family of God (Rom. 8:15), yet it awaits its full realization until we receive resurrection bodies (Rom. 8:23).

D. The Ramifications of Adoption

1. Adoption means placing us in a family to which we did not naturally belong (cf. Eph. 2:3). Children of wrath become sons of God.
2. Adoption means complete freedom from former relationships, particularly to the Law (Gal. 4:5). In other words, the other side of adoption is freedom from the Law.
3. Adoption is possible only because of a voluntary act of the One doing the adopting. Before the foundation of the world God's plan included our adoption (Eph. 1:5).
4. Adoption means we have full rights to all the privileges of being in God's family (Rom. 8:15). Spiritual growth may be involved in the enjoyment of those privileges, but every believer has the right to them from the moment of salvation on.

And this is all true because of Christ's redemption (Gal. 4:5).

Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ADOPTION

ADOPTION is that privilege, bestowed upon those who are united with Christ, and justified by faith, by which they are admitted into the family of God, adopted as his children, and made joint heirs with his own Son.

In the strict sense of the word “Son,” this title can be given only to the Eternal Son of God, who is the only begotten of the Father (John 1:14), and is exclusively “the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance.” (Heb. 1:3).

But others are called participatively sons of God, as probably the angels (Job 1:6; 38:7), as Adam (Luke 3:38), and as Israel (Ex. 4:22; Hosea 11:1; cf. Rom. 9:4). The sonship of angels and of Adam, manifestly proceeds from their creation by God in his image, and likeness. That of Israel, however, is to be ascribed to the typical relation which that nation occupied to the true people of God. The application to Christ in Matt. 2:15, of the sonship declared of Israel in Ex. 4:22, and Hosea 11:1, together with the adoption to which Paul refers, Rom. 9:4, shows, that Israel’s sonship, like Israel’s election, was but a type, the fulfilment and reality of which were to be found only in the antitype. So far as Israel itself was concerned, the title could mean no more, than that that nation had been chosen by God to be outwardly his people, the depositaries of his holy oracles, and the means through which his salvation would come to man. John 4:22.

The sonship ascribed to the believer in Christ, will be best understood by considering its gracious origin, its peculiar nature, and the wondrous blessings which it confers.

I. ITS GRACIOUS ORIGIN

1. It is not due to any natural relation, either originally possessed, or restored through justification.
2. Nor does it arise from any new image or likeness of God, which has come through regeneration.
3. It is the simple gift of God’s love to those who by faith are brought into union with his proper Son.
4. It is an act originating entirely in the good pleasure of God. Eph. 1:5.
5. It is due, meritoriously, only to the work of Christ. It could be founded thus upon nothing else.
6. It is conferred like justification upon all who by faith receive Christ. John 1:12.
7. It is bestowed at the beginning of the Christian career, when there could be no ground for supposing it due to the character or acts of the recipient.

II. ITS PECULIAR NATURE

If what has been said shows that the gift of sonship to the believer is a gracious act of God, that

fact will appear more plain as we study the peculiar nature of that sonship.

1. It is an act by which God chooses to take those who are not his children, and to make them such by adopting them into his family. Because of this they “are no more strangers and sojourners, but ye are fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.” Eph. 2:19.
2. As they are united in this sonship with his own Son, who “is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation,” (Col. 1:15), “the beginning of the creation of God,” (Rev. 3:14), so does their sonship partake of the nature of his not in its divine relations, but in those by which he is also, even in that human nature, the Son of God. Luke 1:35.
3. It is an everlasting sonship; because its continuance depends not upon what they do, and are, but upon what he has done, and is.
4. It is one in which Christ Jesus “is made unto us wisdom from God and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” 1 Cor. 1:30. Thus are all their deficiencies removed and exchanged for the glory of his abundant fulness.
5. It is one in connection with which is fulfilled the prayer of Christ, “that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us; ... “that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and Thou in me, that they may be perfected into one.” John 17:21–23.
6. To such a perfection of sonship do they consequently attain, that not of, nor through themselves, but solely through Christ Jesus, do they thus become “partakers of the divine nature,” (2 Pet. 1:4), attaining as near as creatures may, to the position and character of proper sonship to God.

III. ITS WONDROUS BLESSINGS

The blessings connected with this sonship are scarcely less wonderful than is its nature.

1. Intimate fellowship with Christ and God. “Wherefore,” says the apostle, “thou art no longer a bond servant, but a son.” Gal. 4:7. “No longer,” said Jesus, “do I call you servants; ... but I have called you friends.” John 15:15.
2. The guidance of the Holy Spirit; “as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.” Rom. 8:14.
3. The witnessing presence of the Holy Spirit: “the Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God.” Rom. 8:16.
4. The conscious recognition in our hearts of God’s relation to us as Father. “God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” Gal. 4:6; also Rom. 8:15.
5. “If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.” Rom. 8:17.
6. Unknown glory in future likeness to Christ: “it is not yet made manifest what we shall be. We know that, if he shall be manifested, we shall be like him.” 1 John 3:2.
7. The inheritance includes all things: “he that overcometh shall inherit these things; and I will be

his God, and he shall be my son.” Rev. 21:7; cf. 1 Cor. 3:21–23.

IV. IT DIFFERS FROM JUSTIFICATION

It has been contended that “adoption cannot be said to be a different act or grace from justification.” [Dabney’s *Theology*, p. 627.] “It appears to me,” says Dr. Dick, [Lect. 73, *Theol.*, vol. 2, p. 224,] “to be virtually the same with justification, and to differ from it merely in the new view which it gives of the relations of believers to God, and in the peculiar form in which it exhibits the blessings to which they are entitled.” Turretine says also “that adoption is included in justification as a part which, with the remission of sins, constitutes this whole blessing; nor can justification be distinguished from adoption, unless so far as it is taken strictly for the remission of sins; whilst in its own formal conception it includes also acceptance unto life which flows from the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.” Turretine’s *Theol.*, B. 16, c. 6, sec. 7.

The position taken by these writers is a contrary extreme to that which some have held, viz: that justification consists only of pardon. It is not to be doubted that justification is more than this, and includes restoration to the favor of God, and to eternal life. But these might have been bestowed without conferring upon the justified the peculiar blessings contained in Adoption. “Adoption,” says Buchanan [on *Justification*, p. 262], “is distinct in some respects from justification. For although both denote a change of relation, it may be affirmed that, according to the Scriptures, pardon, acceptance, and adoption, are distinct privileges, the one rising above the other in the order in which they have been stated;—that if it be conceivable that a sinner might have been pardoned, without being accepted to eternal life, it is equally conceivable that he might have been both pardoned and accepted, without being adopted as a son;—and that, while the two first properly belong to his justification, as being both founded on the same relation,—that of a Ruler and Subject,—the third is radically distinct from them, as being founded on a nearer, more tender, and more endearing relation,—that between a Father and his Son.”

Dabney argues that there is no difference between the two because the “instrument is the same—faith—and because the meritorious ground of adoption is the same with that of justification, viz: the righteousness of Christ.”

But these facts, which are admitted, are due to another, which is that the faith by which we are justified is one which secures to us union with Christ. It would not necessarily follow that this union confers upon us only a single blessing or a number of blessings which may be combined together under one name. We can only learn this by examination. If, therefore, it shall appear that there are distinctions between the accompanying blessings, to the extent that these exist must those blessings be regarded as different.

That there are distinctions appears to be plain from the following considerations:

1. The Scriptures speak separately of justification and adoption, and do not state that the latter is, in whole, or in part, the same as the former.
2. Justification is ascribed to the righteous character of God as its formal ground. In it he is only gracious in accepting and providing a substitute. Adoption is expressly referred to the love of God. 1 John 3:1. The fact that these cannot be interchanged, and justification referred to love, or

adoption to justice, shows a decided distinction between them.

3. While there is a change of relation in each of them, in justification it is a change of relation to the law, and only through that to the lawgiver and judge; in adoption it is a change of relation to the family of God and thus to God as the Father.

4. While faith is that through which each is attained, in justification it is a condition precedent to a forensic act which we are assured that God will do because of righteousness as well as faithfulness (1 John 1:9); while in adoption it is merely receptive of Christ, securing that union through which the paternal love of God flows freely on no other ground than faithfulness to his promises.

5. The act of justification is never ascribed to the Son, and is seen to be plainly a prerogative of the Father as God; but it is said of the Son that “as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name.” John 1:12. In some sense, therefore, which is not true of justification, adoption is connected as a gift with the Son as well as the Father.

The above considerations are sufficient to show that there is a real basis of distinction between Justification and Adoption, and that the latter is not included in the former. They are separate effects which flow from the union with Christ attained through faith; because of which we are made partakers of all the benefits of his meritorious work. Justification is one of these; and by it we obtain pardon, and favour with God, which is eternal life. Adoption is yet another which confers upon us the especial privilege of children and heirs of God. It is no more to be confounded with justification than is sanctification, which is also an effect of the same union with Christ, for, although its distinctions are not so many, nor so broad, yet to the extent that they exist, they are as real.

“This closer and more endearing relation to God, which is constituted by Adoption, is necessary, in addition to that which is included in our Justification, to complete the view of our Christian privileges, and to enhance our enjoyment of them, by raising us above the spirit of bondage which is unto fear; and cherishing the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba, Father. It is necessary, also, to explain how the sins of believers are not visited with penal inflictions, properly so called, but are nevertheless treated in the way of fatherly chastisement; and, still further, to show that the kingdom of heaven hereafter will not be bestowed as wages for work done, but as an ‘inheritance,’ freely bestowed, on those, and those only, who are ‘joint heirs with Christ.”
Buchanan on Justification, pp. 263, 264.

James Petigru Boyce, Abstract of Systematic Theology (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 404–409.