

# **Blessed Assurance: Adoption Divine: Understanding Paul’s Adoption Imagery as Evidence of Eternal Security**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the middle of Romans, chapter 8, the Apostle Paul begins a series of sentences that include imagery of believers being adopted by God. This passage, along with similar analogies in Ephesians and Galatians, has been overlooked for its significance. In this essay, the issue of adoption and its relevance to eternal security will be examined. This paper will explore the history, the language, the laws, and the context of Romans 8:12-17 to show how Paul equates human redemption to being adopted into the family of God, a relationship that, properly understood, speaks to the heart of eternal security.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Paul used the language in the letter to the Romans when word came to him in Corinth of trouble in the church. At that time, the city of Rome was wicked, with a population of about a million people—including 40,000-50,000 Jews.<sup>1</sup> Nero was on the throne, but had not yet begun his assault on the Christian church. It was a time of greed, sexual immorality, idol worship, and sordid behavior of all kinds. Against that backdrop, the church at Rome was thriving with a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers—a fact that hindered as well as helped growth. Paul, writing just before he set out on his final missionary journey, penned this letter to the church at Rome. “It is the product of Paul’s mature theological thought and a thorough presentation of the gospel. In fact, the book of Romans may be the most important letter ever penned in human history.”<sup>2</sup> In dealing with an exploding mixture of backgrounds in the church at Rome—from Jews who were part of God’s heritage of Israel through Gentiles from all parts of the kingdom—Paul needed a way to show both sides that salvation was by God for all, to all, and for all time. The apostle needed a way to examine man’s relationship to God—regardless of each person’s individual heritage—that would show the depth and breadth of God’s care for humanity in terms and relationships that the people in the church would readily understand. He found his answer in the relationship of adoption. The concept goes to the very heart of his theology and understanding of man’s relationship with God, and God’s plan for humanity. “The word *adoption* (the Greek means

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross and The Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2009), 519.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 511.

‘instating as a son’) appears only five times, and of these occurrences only three refer to the Christian’s present relationship to God in Christ (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:5, Ephesians 1:5). Yet the thought itself is the nucleus and focal point of the whole New Testament teaching on the Christian life.”<sup>3</sup> Paul appears to be “tapping into these stereotypical family attitudes and norms in order to describe his understanding of the church as a family.”<sup>4</sup>

## **THE IMPORTANCE**

Why is the concept so important for Christians to understand? It is because the “glory of our adoption by God is that it gives us the only object of affection (God) that provides rest, satisfies the longing heart, and makes the impoverished unimaginably rich, even in our soul’s darkest nights. In other words, adoption gives our restless and fearful hearts the all-satisfying love of the triune God.”<sup>5</sup> The Apostle Paul understood that fact. He also understood Roman law, as well as the structure and function of family. In today’s world, adoption simply means “to take (a child of other parents) as one’s own child; to take up and practice as one’s own; to accept formally and put into effect.”<sup>6</sup> The adoption of a child includes many steps for prospective adoptive families—including background checks, financial audits, parenting skills examinations, living condition suitability, sustainability of the potential family unit, and more. It is seen as a way for unwanted or abandoned children to find a home. Laws govern parental rights, visitations (if any), custodial issues, and more. Adoptions can take place from within one’s own county, one’s own region, one’s own country, or inter-country. In today’s world, adoption can cost a family several thousands of dollars, depending on where the adopted child is coming from, any costs that are paid to cover the birth mother’s expenses, visas, physical exams, adoption fees, legal fees, and more. The potential adoptive family must pass intense scrutiny and investigation to be approved as parents.

## **ADOPTION HISTORY**

Yet adoption in Paul’s time was not exactly the same. “Adoption is an ancient family expression; it is not just a legal but a *sociolegal* term; hence an understanding of the social dynamics of ancient Roman family life is germane to any proper understanding and interpretation of Paul’s *huiiothesia* term.”<sup>7</sup> For Romans, family was important—and the way to maintain large families was kept flexible, which was important in “a regime where the

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<sup>3</sup> J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 214.

<sup>4</sup> Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted Into God’s Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 61.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Cruver, editor, *Reclaiming Adoption: Missional Living Through Rediscovery of Abba Father* (Adelphi, Md.: Cruciform Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>6</sup> *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2004), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Burke, 61.

early death of wife, husband, or child was always possible.”<sup>8</sup> The family was “the fundamental bedrock of ancient Roman society and regarded as the primary context of social, religious, political, and economic security and fulfillment.”<sup>9</sup> There were two main ways a Roman male citizen could adopt a male—most often times an adult. “First, he could persuade his *paterfamilias* to transfer him (*adoptio*). This is what Augustus did when he adopted the two young sons of Agrippa and Julia, his own daughter. Gaius (born 20 B.C.) and Lucius (born 17) thus became adoptive sons of their maternal grandfather. Second, a Roman could convince an independent head of household to give up his own name and family cults and become a son-in-power (*adrogatio*).”<sup>10</sup> The *paterfamilias* held lifelong power over his family—including adopted children and slaves. His authority and control were so complete and thorough that children were not allowed to form their own households until he had died.<sup>11</sup> The main reason for it all was to maintain possessions and power within a family. The family and succession was so important and foundational to Roman society that when a family line “was under the threat of extinction, adoption was a lifeline for a ‘family in danger of dying out’ (Crook 1967:135). This was usually due to the *paterfamilias*’ inability to have offspring of his own or because his own children had failed to live to adulthood; and so that he might have an heir, recourse was made to adopting a son from another family.”<sup>12</sup> As Trevor Burke points out in his book *Adopted Into God’s Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor*: “Adoption was a well-known practice in the ancient world and was not only of great importance in Roman law and society but was also a ‘treasured status’ (Finger 1993:48). This is because adoption was only a safeguard against the demise of a family but also provided new opportunities for the adoptee that would have otherwise not existed.”<sup>13</sup> In ancient Rome, there were two main types of adoption—*adrogatio* and *adoptio*. In *adrogatio*, the older process, only males could be adopted and it “denoted that the adoption of a person who was *sui iuris*: namely, not under the legal power or authority (*potestas*) of his father.”<sup>14</sup> In effect, this adoption was the means by which two families were fused together.<sup>15</sup> This adoption was taken very seriously, to the point that only a man who had no offspring could undertake the form called *adrogatio*.<sup>16</sup> The second form was called *adoptio*. “This involved the adoption of a male *alieni iuris* (one under the legal power and authority of another), which was much more satisfactory socially and sacrally than adoption of a male *sui iurius*, because it meant that no family or religious cult was being wiped out.”<sup>17</sup> According to Burke, “The whole procedure involved, in the

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<sup>8</sup> Ken M. Campbell, editor, *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2003), 176.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, 63-64.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Burke, 67-66.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

first instance, the severing the old *potestas* followed by the establishing of the paternal authority of the new father.”<sup>18</sup> This is the version of adoption Paul is discussing in Romans 8:12-17.

## PAUL’S TERMINOLOGY

So what exactly is the term Paul uses in Romans 8:15 and 23, Galatians 4:5-7 and Ephesians 1:5? The word is *huiiothesia*, a term used exclusively by the Apostle Paul. It is a hybrid of the Greek words “*huios*,” which means “a son,” and “*thesis*,” which means to place.<sup>19</sup> The term “signifies the place and condition of a son given to one to whom it does not naturally belong.”<sup>20</sup> It is a word that carries deep theological meaning and importance because “it relates to how Israel and the Christian may be ‘children’ and ‘heirs’ of God although they are not uniquely or by nature so, as in the case of Christ.”<sup>21</sup> The word *huiiothesia* is listed five times in the New Testament, “with the underlying sense of ‘adoption’ in each case, all referring to the status of believers as children, sons adopted by God in and through Christ.”<sup>22</sup> That is a key to how Paul understands the term—it is not a relationship everyone automatically has. “Sonship to God is not, therefore, a universal status into which everyone enters by natural birth, but a supernatural gift which one receives by receiving Jesus.”<sup>23</sup> This adoption, when compared to the Roman system of adoption into a family, is a more complete and thorough event than any human institution could fathom. In short, adoption can be defined succinctly as “an act of God whereby he makes us members of his family.”<sup>24</sup> Anthony Morton explained it in greater detail in *The Expository Times*:

It is Paul who discovers, and tells the Galatian converts (in Galatians 4:4-7), that with the coming of Jesus Christ the naturalness of our relation with God and his goodness has become even greater than that between the fertile soil and the green shoots, for now it is the naturalness of the relation between a parent and child. Now we are his children, with his seed within us, leading us to address him with the intensely intimate name ‘Abba.’ And so the change from an external to an internal relation becomes even more dramatic, being no less than the change from slave to son or daughter.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>19</sup> *Strong’s Concise Concordance and Vine’s Concise Dictionary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Walter A. Elwell, editor, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 25.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen D. Renn, editor, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Packer, 201.

<sup>24</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 736.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Morton, “28<sup>th</sup> December: The First After Christmas,” *Expository Times*, Vol. 120/2 (2008:87).

The relationship Paul describes by the term *huiiothesia* is similar to the adoption practices of his day, but different in that it involves kinship covenant between God and individual people across the world. Whereas the Abrahamic covenant was between God and a particular people—in this case Israel—the New Testament adoption is open to both Jews and Gentiles through Christ. “For Paul, believers who experience the life-giving and life-animating gift of the Spirit have not only been manumitted from slavery (Romans 6:16); they have been ushered into an adoptive relationship with the deity modeled upon that shared between Christ and God.”<sup>26</sup>

## THE CHURCH AT ROME

Knowing the backdrop of the phrase is necessary to understanding why that particular imagery fit the letter Paul wrote to the church at Rome. There is no doubt among scholars that Paul wrote the letter to the church at Rome.<sup>27</sup> The Apostle probably wrote the letter sometime during the winter of 54-55 AD most likely while staying in Corinth—at the end of his third missionary journey.<sup>28</sup> “Phoebe, Erastus and Gaius were with Paul when he wrote the letter. They are associated with Corinth or a city close by. Thus Corinth is the most likely provenance of the letter.”<sup>29</sup> Paul is very clear as to whom the recipients are—Christians at the church in Rome, a fact he states in Romans 1:7 (ESV): “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his saints; Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The church at Rome was not started by the Apostle Paul. In fact, the “origins of the church in Rome are unknown.”<sup>30</sup> At that time, Rome was an evil and decadent place. Under the leadership of Nero, the city and region became extremely wicked, with the worship of idols, sexual immorality and other perversions running rampant.

Yet in the midst of all this, Christianity did not suffer but survived and thrived,<sup>31</sup> and that growth may have been why Paul wrote the letter. The church at Rome was a combination of Jews and Gentiles, a fact that came about due to Claudius expelling the Jews from Rome in AD 49. The ones left behind were not Jews, but Gentile converts, who took over operating the ministry. As the years passed, Jews slowly migrated back, causing a tension in the church as both groups worked to fit together.

As time passed, of course, Gentiles in Rome also became Christians. The Roman historian Suetonius records that the Roman emperor Claudius (reigned A.D. 41-54) expelled Jews from Rome because of strife over “Chrestos.” Suetonius likely misunderstood the name, so that the dispute probably was about “Christos” (Latin for Christ). The expulsion of Jews

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<sup>26</sup> Mary F. Foskett, “The Accidents of Being and the Politics of Identity: Biblical Images of Adoption and Asian Adoptees in America,” *Semia*, Vol. 90/91, (2002: 142.

<sup>27</sup> Köstenberger, Kellum, Quarles, 513.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 517.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 519.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 520.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 520.

from Rome is confirmed by Acts 18:2. Because of the expulsion, the Gentile churches would have developed for a number of years apart from the Jews. Over the years, Jewish Christians slowly filtered back into Roman churches. It is not difficult to imagine that tensions would develop between law-observing Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians who lived free of the restrictions in the Mosaic law. It seems, however, that the church was made up mainly of Gentile Christians (see Romans 1:5-6, 13; 11:13; 15:15-16).<sup>32</sup>

Paul was writing to this diverse audience “so that they would be united in the gospel he preached, and so that they would comprehend how the gospel spoke to the issues that divided them.”<sup>33</sup> Specifically, the two groups were faced with basic respect issues. “They (Jews) returned to find that the very churches they formerly dominated were now controlled and led by Gentile Christians. They likely felt that Gentile Christian leaders were not appropriately appreciative and sensitive to their own rich Jewish heritage. Gentile Christians resented pressure from their Jewish brothers and sisters to adopt Jewish ways and restrict their freedom in Christ.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, it can be seen, that while the book of Romans is viewed today as one of the cornerstones of theological doctrine and discourse in the Scriptures, it was “an occasional document, that is, a letter written to address the particular needs of a specific group of churches. They (scholars) point out that the letter does not expound on some important aspects of Paul’s theology such as his doctrine of the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:17-24), the Second Coming (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11), or the doctrine of the church that is explicated in far greater detail in Ephesians and 1 Corinthians. This silence is hard to explain if the letter were written in a general theological treatise.”<sup>35</sup> In short, Paul had three main goals in writing this particular letter to this particular people at this particular time—first, Paul wanted to remind the believers in Rome of basic gospel truths as part of his responsibility to spread the gospel; second, he wanted to address several of the problems facing the churches, especially calling them to peaceful unity; and, third, he wanted to seek their support for his planned Spanish missionary journey.<sup>36</sup>

### **ROMANS 8:12-17 TRANSLATIONS**

In the midst of this grand letter—literally in the eighth chapter of 16 chapters—Paul pens the five verses that include the imagery of believers being adopted into God’s family: The English Standard Version translates the Greek text of verses 12-17:

*So then, brothers, we are debtors, not the flesh to live according to the flesh. 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. For all who are led by the Spirit of*

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 2151-2152.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 2152.

<sup>34</sup> Köstenberger, Kellum, Quarles, 523.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 524.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 524-525.

*God are sons of God. For 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!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and 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.*

The key verses are 14-16. Those verses are translated nearly the same way by several translations:

**KING JAMES:**

*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba Father. The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.*

**NEW KING JAMES:**

*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”*

**AMPLIFIED:**

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For [the Spirit which] you have now received [is] not a spirit of slavery to put you once more in bondage to fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption [the Spirit producing sonship] in [the bliss of] which we cry, Abba (Father)! Father! The Spirit Himself [thus] testifies with our own spirit, [assuring us] that we are children of God.*

**NEW AMERICAN STANDARD:**

*For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.*

**NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION:**

*..because those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received*

*the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*

## **ROMANS 8:12-17 ANALYSIS**

In the first 17 verses of chapter eight, including the adoption verses, Paul is talking to the church about the new life they live in Christ. “The apostle, having fully explained the doctrine of justification, and pressed the necessity of sanctification, in this chapter applies himself to the consolation of the Lord’s people.”<sup>37</sup> According to the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Paul in chapter eight:

First, he considers the question of moral indifference (6:1-8:39). One who is “in Christ” no longer lives under the dominion of sin (6:14), has been “put to death to the law” (7:4 AT), and is freed from “condemnation” (8:1). Far from leading, however, to a life of moral indifference (6:1, 15), this leads to being “led by the Spirit of God” (8:14). Thereby we “put to death the deeds of the flesh (8:13 AT) on the basis of a new relationship, as “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (8:17 NRSV). Even suffering may be endured cheerfully (8:18, cf. 5:1-5), for Christians know that nothing can finally separate them “from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39 NSRV).<sup>38</sup>

In the first verse of chapter eight, Paul asserts to the church that there is no condemnation to those who have Christ as savior. In verses two-to-five, the apostle elaborates on the plan of salvation, noting that God did what man could not do—condemn sin in the flesh so that the requirement of the law would be fulfilled in believers who (ESV) “walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” The apostle then affirms the distinct contradiction between living in the flesh and living in the Spirit. Paul notes that those who focus on the flesh and the things of the flesh are condemned to death, but those who focus on the Spirit and the things of God have life. “Those who are in the flesh behave as sons and daughters of sinful Adam and are hostile to God. They do not keep God’s law, and indeed they are unable to keep it because they are slaves to sin. Because unbelievers (those who are in the flesh) are in bondage to sin and unable to do what God commands, they fail to please God.”<sup>39</sup> Paul counters that life by noting that believers are no longer in the flesh, but are filled with the Holy Spirit. Since they are filled with the Spirit, they are no longer slaves to the fleshly nature, but bound to God.<sup>40</sup> The Apostle ends the section with the summary statement (ESV): “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who has raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit which dwells in you.”

But how will that happen? How does it happen? What does that relationship look like exactly? Paul begins to explain in verse 12. He tells the church that Christians are

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<sup>37</sup> *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 2210.

<sup>38</sup> Vanhoozer, 697-698.

<sup>39</sup> *English Standard Version*, 2170.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 2170.



debtors—but not to the flesh. He explains that if they live by the flesh, they will die. However, if the Spirit lives in a believer, that person can, through the power of the Spirit, (ESV) “put to death the deeds of the body,” and so will they live. Christians can accomplish this, Paul says, because of the adoption given them by God through Christ—and that is a great inheritance. “The value of the inheritance is determined by the worth of the one who gives it. Our glorious God promises to grant us an inheritance; and, in fact, he himself is our inheritance! Of all the things God could give us, the most precious and satisfying reward in the universe is God himself.”<sup>41</sup> More importantly, Paul asserts that this adoption and inheritance is both a “here-and-now” and a “soon-to-be” proposition.

In the sequence of 8:13-14 two temporal perspectives are juxtaposed: the future (“you will live”), and the present (“[they] are God’s children”). The present continues in the next two verses (“we cry,” and “we are God’s children”) but the adoption is restored to the future in 8:23 (“we await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies”). Thus, a new tension is will be developed in the remainder of the chapter to match, and perhaps elaborate upon, the imperative-indicative tension in 8:5-13. There is apparently a present experience of divine adoption, but the promise of life is not yet realized, and bodily death is still before us.<sup>42</sup>

It is all through the act of adoption. The adoption received now through the Spirit and the adoption that will be received in the future. The point Paul is trying to make is that through the adoption process, undeserving mankind becomes a royal heir imbued with all the rights of a natural-born son. “Paul draws on the Roman background to make these theological statements. Interestingly, several Roman emperors adopted boys for the purpose of conferring on them certain authorities and privileges. Julius Caesar adopted Octavian; Octavian adopted Tiberius, who adopted Gaius Caligula. Gaius Caligula’s uncle adopted Nero just four years before Paul wrote Romans. He and the other rulers were legally sons. We have been given something infinitely greater: namely, the privileges and blessings that come from being an heir of the Father of glory!”<sup>43</sup> And the Roman backdrop is an important context, especially in light of the Greek civilization that permeated that era. It is interesting to note that Paul uses the adoption terminology only in communicating with churches in Roman states—the church at Rome, in Galatia and the Ephesians. That could be because there were distinct differences in the adoption practices in both Greek and Roman life. “For example, the absolute nature of adoption, so much a part of Roman legal practice, was conspicuously absent in Hellenistic law, in that an adoptee did not sever completely his relationships with his old family when entering his ‘new’ family.”<sup>44</sup> Paul wanted to make sure the believers in the church at Rome understood that in the adoption from God—just like adoption in Roman culture—there was an absoluteness, a surety that the relationship completely severed the believer from his old sinful nature, the one bound to the law

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<sup>41</sup> Tony Merida, Rick Morton, *Orphanology: Awakening to Gospel-Centered Adoption and Orphan Care* (Birmingham, Ala.: New Hope Publishers, 2011), 39-40.

<sup>42</sup> Richard J. Dillon, “The Spirit as Taskmaster and Troublemaker in Romans 8” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 60/4 (2004: 689).

<sup>43</sup> Merida, Morton, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Burke, 59.

through the flesh. The main evidence of that changed relationship is the Spirit of adoption that allows believers to cry out to God. “Men may give a charter of adoption; but it is God’s prerogative, when he adopts, to give a spirit of adoption—the nature of children. The Spirit of adoption works in the children of God a filial love to God as Father, a delight in him, and a dependence upon him, as a Father. A sanctified soul bears the image of God, as the child bears the image of the father.”<sup>45</sup> In short, Paul’s audience would have understood the metaphor and that Roman law noted that “the citizen so adopted became a virtual slave and came under the paternal authority of the adoptive father. Adoption conferred rights, but it came with a list of duties as well.”<sup>46</sup> That is essential to understanding the final part of verse 17 (ESV): “... and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may be glorified in him.” Paul establishes that a Christian’s willingness to suffer like Christ would be evidence of his adoption with Christ as a joint heir of God. Christians should be willing to endure and persevere as evidence of their true place as an adopted child of God.

### **ADOPTION AS SECURITY**

So, Paul uses adoption to denote permanence for the believer in the kingdom of God. By using the adoption metaphor in the context of Roman life, he is showing believers that their salvation is a permanent state—just like absolute adoption in Roman law—yet he also is showing them that there is a list of tasks that come with being an adopted son of God. “In Romans 8:17, Paul goes so far as to say that believers are ‘heirs with God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.’ Suffering with Christ is so intimately connected with ultimate enjoyment of his glory that the two things cannot be separated.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, the Apostle, while not believing that suffering is part of salvation, seems to believe that “suffering with Christ is such a normal part of being in Christ that Paul cannot conceive one without the other.”<sup>48</sup> Paul follows the discourse in verses 12-17 with a discussion in verses 18-39 about the surety of that adoption and its future rewards. In verses 17-25, the Apostle equates a believer’s hope with the future part of the adoption (v. 23)—the (ESV) “redemption of our bodies. For in this hope, we are saved. Now, hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” It is all a part of the “signs” of a person being adopted into the family of God. But that adoption, Paul shows, is two-fold—one part here and now and one part to come. “In Romans 8:23 the ‘adoption’ of the believer is set forth as still future, as it there includes the redemption of the body when the living will be changed and those who have fallen asleep will be raised.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2212.

<sup>46</sup> Elwell, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Zane Pratt, “Mission and Suffering,” *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, The Church, and The Nations* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2011), 216.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

<sup>49</sup> *Strong’s Concise Concordance and Vine’s Concise Dictionary*, 7.

In all, Romans 8 shows in Paul's theology a description of the adequacy of God's mercy and grace and his call to believers to react to those facts.<sup>50</sup> J.I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God*, sees the apostle dealing with specific gifts of God in the first 30 verses of Romans 8: "Paul makes his point by dwelling on four gifts of God given to all who by faith are 'in Christ Jesus.' The first is *righteousness*—'no condemnation (v. 1). The second is the *Holy Spirit* (vv. 4-27). The third is *sonship*—adoption into the divine family in which the Lord Jesus Christ is the first born (vv. 14-17, 29). The fourth is *security*, now and forever (vv. 28-30). This composite endowment—a status, plus a dynamic, plus an identity, plus a safe conduct—is more than enough to support the Christian whatever his trouble."<sup>51</sup> Christians have all of those promises because of their status as children of God. "Jesus is the Son of God in a way we are not in that he is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. But because he came, we are sons of God, too, with full family membership and rights of inheritance."<sup>52</sup> Paul is using the adoption imagery to convey to the church at Rome that all believers are heirs with Christ and have put—by adoption—into the family of God, now and forever since the adoption process will be completed in two steps. John Piper, in a chapter for the book *Reclaiming Adoption: Missional Living Through the Rediscovery of Abba Father*, writes:

Why does Paul say we are 'waiting for our adoption?' Aren't adopted already? Yes, when Christ died for us, the price was paid, and when we trust him, we are legally and permanently in the family. But God's purpose for adoption is not to leave any of his children in a state of groaning and suffering. He raised Jesus from the dead with a new body, and he promises that part of our adoption will be a new resurrection body with no disabilities and no more groaning. Therefore, what we wait for is the *full experience* of our adoption—the resurrection of our bodies. There is much groaning in the path of adoption on the way to full salvation. But the outcome is glorious. It is worth it all. 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.' (Romans 8:18).<sup>53</sup>

Piper continues to say that Paul is noting all the suffering and groaning being faced by Christians in this present life, "is groaning in hope because we are adopted by God and destined for a resurrection and an eternal future of health and wholeness and joy. It will be worth it all."<sup>54</sup> Human beings were not worthy, Paul notes, and so God did an amazing thing by not just redeeming humanity, but adopting man and woman as his children. "The distance between what we are, and what God is, is infinitely greater than any distance

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<sup>50</sup> Packer, 258.

<sup>51</sup> Packer, 258.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Driscoll, Gerry Breshears, *Death By Love: Letters From The Cross* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008), 213.

<sup>53</sup> Cruver, 104.

<sup>54</sup> Cruver, 104.

between us and a child we might adopt. God crossed the greatest cultural barrier to redeem us and adopt us.”<sup>55</sup>

### **OTHER NEW TESTAMENT ADOPTION PASSAGES**

Yet Romans 8:12-17 is not the only mention Paul makes of the adoption concept. He uses it as well in Romans 9:4, Galatians 4:5 and Ephesians 1:5. Both the church in Galatia and the church at Ephesus had heavy Roman influence, and thus, the metaphor is used because Paul knew they would understand the context.

In Galatians 4:1-7, Paul writes (ESV):

*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. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. 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. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.*

Paul’s comparison of adoption to “Israel’s experience of being redeemed by Christ from the curses of the Deuteronomic covenant is striking.”<sup>56</sup> Scott W. Hahn, in his book *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises*, notes that Paul equates the concept of adoption in Galatians 4:1-7 with a grant-style covenant. “Here, the primary recipient of the grant is the ‘Son’ par excellence, who demonstrates exceptional virtue while living ‘under the law,’ thereby securing a divinely sworn reward which affects the redemption of his own: ‘so that we might receive the full legal rights of sons.’ (4:4)”<sup>57</sup> Paul sees the Deuteronomic covenant as something that continued into his day. “In Paul’s day, Israel’s experience of the covenant curses was yet an ongoing process as it suffered under Roman dominion. Paul interprets the New Covenant against a backdrop of Israel’s ongoing vassalage under the Deuteronomic covenant—and also in light of the Deuteronomic promise of deliverance and salvation for Israel and the nations.”<sup>58</sup> Galatians 4:1-7, then is a view of redemption, adoption, and eternal security that mirrors the imagery Paul used in Romans 8:12-17. It is a sense of feeling the joy when a believer moves from eternal condemnation through rejection of Christ to eternal bliss and security after accepting Christ. “This is the view of the great change which Paul sets out in Galatians 4:1-7, contrasting his readers’ previous life of slavish legalism and superstition in religion

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<sup>55</sup> Cruver, 103.

<sup>56</sup> Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009), 271.

<sup>57</sup> Hahn, 271.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 379.

(vv. 3, 5, 8) with their present knowledge of their Creator as their Father (v. 6) and their pledged benefactor (v. 7). This, says Paul, is where your faith in Christ has brought you; you have received 'the adoption of sons' (v. 5, KJV); 'you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son then an heir' (v. 7, RSV)."<sup>59</sup>

In Ephesians 1:5-10, Paul once again takes to the adoption metaphor to describe a believer's relationship with God (ESV): "In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." In this verse, believers "are said to have been foreordained unto 'adoption as sons' through Jesus Christ."<sup>60</sup> It is, in short, another example of Paul explaining God's eternal purposes for his people, his creation, and the future. Ephesians 1:3-14, is a "magnificent epitome of God's plans: the redemption, adoption, forgiveness, and sealing of a people for God's own possession, determined from eternity, now being brought to pass through the effective exercise of God's will."<sup>61</sup> Paul carries the themes of redemption, adoption, and eternal security through these verses as well, continuing the theology and ideology that guided his message.

### **OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES**

Taking that analogy of adoption, there are two main Old Testament examples often used for adoption. The first is Moses, who was born of a Hebrew woman, but raised as an Egyptian. "J. Cheryl Exum (1983; 1994), Brevard S. Childs, Meir Malul, and others have observed both the absence of any formal or legal designation for Moses' relationship to the daughter of Pharaoh and the resemblance of their relationship to that of adoption. Malul notes the similarity between details in the Moses saga and the ancient Near Eastern practice of giving an adopted infant to its birthmother for wet-nursing. Childs even suggests that the practice may have been a way of asserting one's newly acquired parental rights over that of the birth mother."<sup>62</sup> Moses was raised by Pharaoh's daughter, but eventually went back to his people. The Scriptures, interestingly enough, give little background into the way in which Moses was raised by the princess. Yet, whether he was officially adopted or not, "Moses is clearly raised not by his birthmother but by Pharaoh's daughter. So immersed is he in his new context, the adult Moses is later identified by strangers, without qualification, as 'an Egyptian.'"<sup>63</sup> The other, and clearer example, is the

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<sup>59</sup> Packer, 208.

<sup>60</sup> *Strong's Concise Concordance and Vine's Concise Dictionary of The Bible*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook: A Concise Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), 614.

<sup>62</sup> Foskett, 137.

<sup>63</sup> Foskett, 137-138.

adoption of the nation of Israel by God as his people. After issuing the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5 and the great commandment to love God in Deuteronomy 6, the Lord lays out the basic elements of the covenant in Deuteronomy 7 (ESV):

And because you listen to these rules and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love that he swore to your fathers. He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples. There shall not be male or female barren among you or among your livestock. And the LORD will take away from you all sickness and none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you knew, will he inflict on you, but he will lay them on all who hate you.

In Ezekiel 11:19-21, God states it this way (ESV):

*“And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord God.”*

God chose Israel; he selected the nation as *his* people. Of all the nations, God chose Israel and its line from Abraham on, to be his adopted people. “One very important element in God’s covenant relations with Israel lay in the dual aspects of conditionality and unconditionality.”<sup>64</sup> The distinctions are quite clear. First, “that the promises made by the Lord in the covenant of grace represent decrees that he will surely bring to pass, when conditions are ripe for their fulfillment; (2) that the personal benefit—and especially the spiritual and eternal benefit—of the divine promise will accrue only to those individuals of the covenant people of God who manifest a true and living faith (demonstrated by a Godly life).”<sup>65</sup> That parallels Paul’s use of the adoption metaphor and its attributes in Romans 8:12-17.

## **COVENANTAL THEOLOGY**

But even with those examples, does the concept of adoption fit into the entirety of covenantal theology? The answer is yes. “Jesus’ ministry culminates the OT redemptive covenants. He is *the* seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), the Savior of the world, in whom the blessings of God become universal, to all who by faith become children of Abraham. He is the final anointed Davidic king, who in righteousness will reign over Israel and all peoples,

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<sup>64</sup> Elwell, 300.

<sup>65</sup> Elwell, 300.

because the kingdom of this world becomes his kingdom (Rev. 11:15).<sup>66</sup> In reality, “Paul sees those among the Gentile nations turning to Christ as a fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise to bless all peoples through Abraham’s seed (Rom. 15:8-13; Gal. 3:7-4:7).<sup>67</sup> In effect, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and the Gentile believers’ ability to be adopted is a continuation of the Old Testament covenant that is being seen as the new covenant in Christ. “Those who are in Christ—whether Jew or Gentile—receive with him all the eschatological blessings that are due to him. In him, they are all, whether Jew or Gentile, sons of God—not only in terms of relationship with the Father but also in terms of promised inheritance (Rom. 8:12-17). In Christ, they all—whether Jew or Gentile—are sons of Abraham, the true circumcision, the holy nation, and the household and commonwealth of God (Gal. 3:23-4:7; Eph. 2-3; Col. 2:6-15, 3:3-11; 1 Peter 2:9-10).<sup>68</sup> The imagery of adoption fits into that covenant—a covenant that began in the time of Abraham when God picked a certain people to be his people, to the new covenant when God fulfilled his promise to Abraham that all the world would be blessed through the patriarch’s lineage—in short, through Christ. Yet Paul is clear to state that the adoption promised in the Old Testament covenants was not fully realized until Christ came. As Wayne Grudem stated:

This is not to say that the Old Testament completely omitted talk of God as our Father, for God did call himself the Father of the children of Israel and called them his children in many places (Ps. 103:13; Isa. 43:6-7; Mal. 1:6, 2:10). But even though there was a consciousness of God as Father to the people of Israel, the full benefits and privileges of membership in God’s family, and the full realization of that membership, did not come until Christ came and the Spirit of the Son of God was poured into our hearts, bearing witness with our spirit that we were God’s children.<sup>69</sup>

Believers are the children of God now through adoption with the future fulfillment of the covenants to come when Christ returns to earth to call his church to heaven.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF ADOPTION**

So what does all this mean? Adoption is a key image that illuminates and demonstrates the depth and effectiveness of God’s justification of those who believe on him through his son, Jesus Christ. It is a state that is new, immediate, and eternal. “Adoption involves a change of both status and condition. In the formal sense, adoption is a declarative matter, an alteration of our legal status. We become God’s children. In addition, however, there is the actual experience of being favored of God. We enjoy what is designated the spirit of

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<sup>66</sup> Stephen R. Spencer, “Doctrine of Last Things,” *Dictionary For Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 439.

<sup>67</sup> Russell D. Moore, “Personal and Cosmic Eschatology,” *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville, Tenn.; B&H Academic, 2007), 867.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 868.

<sup>69</sup> Grudem, 737.

sonship.”<sup>70</sup> Adoption is a lost image that goes to the very heart of a believer’s relationship with God. Not only is he redeemed, justified, and beginning a road to sanctification, the original relationship that was lost at the fall is now restored—one believer at a time. “We are by nature and creation children of God, but we have voted ourselves out of God’s family as it were. God, in adopting us, however, restores us to the relationship with him for which we were originally intended.”<sup>71</sup> It is God’s way of taking what was originally intended, but tossed out by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and bringing it full circle to those who will believe on him and seek that restored relationship through the Christ. Tom Wright, in his book *Paul For Everyone: Romans Part One*, writes:

In particular, the Christian discovers a new identity, picking up Israel’s vocation in the Old Testament: adoption. When the holy Spirit comes to dwell in a person’s heart, the first sign is that they recognize God as Father; this, I think, is part of what Paul meant in 5:5 when he spoke of God being poured out in our hearts by the holy Spirit. The cry ‘Abba Father’ uses the old Aramaic word which Jesus himself had used for God (Mark 14:36). Paul refers to the same cry in Galatians 4:5-6, where again there are powerful echoes of the Exodus story. This time he interprets what is going on in terms of the coming together of the holy Spirit with our own spirit.<sup>72</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The adoption analogy should cause believers to reevaluate their relationship with God. In Romans 8:31-39, Paul “calls on his readers to react to what he has said. ‘What, then, shall we say in response to this?’ (v. 31). He goes on to spell out the reaction which is his and should also be ours, and as he does his theme shifts slightly and becomes *the adequacy of the God of grace*. Interest moves from the gift to the Giver, from the thought of deliverance from evil to the thought of God being to each Christian what he said he would be to Abraham—‘your shield, your very great reward’ (Gen. 15:1).”<sup>73</sup>

In the church’s theology, understanding the depth and breadth of adoption and its implications for Christians should permeate through every message, every work, every song, every liturgy, everything in life. Adoption through the redemption of Christ’s death on the cross should cause great joy in all believers. As French theologian Peter Abelard said: “Therefore, our redemption through the suffering of Christ is that deeper love within us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also secures for us the true liberty of the children of God, in order that we might do all things out of love rather than out of fear—love for him who has shown us such grace that no greater can be found.”<sup>74</sup> It is how

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<sup>70</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 322.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 322.

<sup>72</sup> Tom Wright, *Paul For Everyone: Romans Part One* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 146.

<sup>73</sup> Packer, 258.

<sup>74</sup> Alister E. McGrath, editor, *The Christian Theology Reader* (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 300.



Christians should view each other, both inter-denominationally and intra-denominationally. “The meaning or significance of adoption becomes most apparent when we examine its results, the effects it has in and upon the believer’s life.”<sup>75</sup> Adoption gives a Christian five things—forgiveness, reconciliation, liberty, care and God’s good will.<sup>76</sup> It is, as was with the old Roman law of *adoptio*, something that gave the adoptee access to things he would not otherwise be able to attain. Theologically, that includes everything from salvation through eternity. The concept should be given a high priority as a means and method to understand exactly what God did for mankind—both from where man is and was and the path God opened up in Christ to where mankind could be. As John Piper wrote:

In adopting us, God gives us the very Spirit of his Son and grants us to feel the affections of belonging to the very family of God. In his mercy, God also works in our families to awaken in adopted children affections for their parents that are far more than legal alignment. These are deeply personal and spiritual bonds. Adopted children do not infer they are our children by checking out the adoption papers. A spirit pervades our relationship that bears witness to this reality. Like the other children in the family, they all cry, “Daddy!” Praise God that he gives us both legal standing as his children and the very Spirit of his Son so that we find ourselves saying from a heart of deep conviction, “Abba, Father.”<sup>77</sup>

The apostle Paul was very astute when he used the imagery of adoption to explain the believer’s relationship to God. Christians were justified—legally—by accepting the death of Jesus on the cross for salvation. Yet, “the warm intimacy that should characterize one’s relationship with God has been lost. This problem is rectified by *adoption*. In adoption one is restored to favor with God and given the opportunity to claim all the benefits provided by the loving Father.”<sup>78</sup> The usage of adoption was appropriate for the churches at Rome, Galatia, and Ephesus. It was a term and relationship they would have understood, being as it was they lived within Roman society. Adoption had meaning then, has meaning now, and will have meaning in the future. As Ken Campbell wrote in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*:

This is an eschatological, salvation-historical event of the first import: through adoption, believers are introduced into the filial relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father, sharing together in the new family of God. While the distinction between Jesus as the unique Son of God and believers as sons and daughters of God in Christ is not obliterated (e.g., Jn. 20:17), believers nonetheless become in a real, spiritual sense brothers and sisters of Jesus as well as one another. ‘Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them

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<sup>75</sup> Erickson, 322.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 322-323.

<sup>77</sup> Cruver, 99.

<sup>78</sup> Erickson, 296.

brothers (Heb. 2:11 NIV).’ Even fruitfulness is to some extent transmogrified from physical childbearing to the harmonious, productive operation of the various members of the body of Christ according to the spiritual gifts supplied by God.<sup>79</sup>

This relationship is one that affects the believer today in how they are able to handle and live in a fallen, sin-sick world, and also to where they are promised to be when this life is over. In short, the concept of adoption should consume and affect the believer’s entire life. “The benefits or privileges that accompany adoption are seen, first, in the way God relates to us, and then also in the way we relate to one another as brothers and sisters in God’s family.”<sup>80</sup> The apostle Paul, in very simplistic and direct terms to the church at Rome, equates human redemption to being adopted into the family of God, a relationship that, properly understood, speaks to the heart of eternal security. As Tony Merida and Rick Morton wrote:

This picture of adoption is central for understanding the gospel because it involves the full scope of God’s gracious work of salvation—past, present, and future are all seen in the description of salvation as adoption. God chose us in eternity pasty (Ephesians 1:5), He brought us to a place of faith in the present, and He promises to complete what he has started on earth in the future. Regarding our future, we understand that we are adopted ‘now’ (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:5), but have ‘not yet’ received the fullness of God’s grace that will be reveled when he returns (Romans 8:23).<sup>81</sup>

Adoption gains a believer the ability to say, with Paul, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

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<sup>79</sup> Campbell, 268.

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