

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON SEVEN)

“ADOPTION”

EPHESIANS 1:3-5

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:

4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.

In verses **four** and **five** of **Ephesians** chapter **one**, the Apostle Paul begins to explain to the Christians in Ephesus how all the “*spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*” have become theirs. He does so by telling them of what God has done in order to connect them with all the exceeding riches of His grace. He writes, “*According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.*”

In these two verses, he introduces to the Ephesians the ideas of **election** and **predestination**. In verse **four**, he speaks of their **election**. He says that they were chosen by God in Christ before the foundation of the world. In **Lesson Six**, we defined election as “a decree of God, before creation, in which He chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of His sovereign grace.” The phrase “*Before the foundation of the world,*” is very important in determining the time when the election occurred. God’s choice to elect certain of the human race for the purposes of salvation was not an act in time, but an eternal act.

In verse **five**, Paul makes reference to their **predestination**. He says that they were predestinated “*unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ unto himself.*” This statement about their predestination is not merely an attempt by Paul to emphasize the point that he had just made about their being chosen by God in Christ before the foundation of the world. This is a revelation of truth that is possibly even more staggering in its implications, for He now informs them that they have been predestinated unto **the adoption of sons**. Not only do they stand before God, they stand before Him as His sons!

The word “*predestinated*” is a translation of the Greek word **proorizo** (**pro-or-id’-zo**), which means “to mark out the boundary or limits of a place, thing or person previously, to predestine or foreordain.” **Hermann Cremer** the German Protestant theologian and author of “***Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek,***” defines **roorizo** “to determine or decree beforehand.” He says, “The matter to be considered when the word is used is not who are the objects of this predestination, but what are they predestined to.” **Expositor’s Bible commentary** suggests that the word **proorizo** should be translated “foreordain,” explaining that the word “is always used of God as determining from eternity.”

What the Apostle is trying to get the Christians in Ephesus to recognize is the mind-blowing reality that before the foundation of the world, it was God’s plan and purpose that certain members of Adam’s fallen race should become His sons! What makes this reality so amazing is the spiritual condition of these certain individuals.

We have a very graphic description of their spiritual condition in chapter 2 and verses 1-3 of this very epistle: *“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.”* The staggering reality is that it was God’s original purpose and plan in eternity, to save the miserable wretches so fittingly represented in this passage, miserable wretches such as you and I, and not only to save them but to adopt them as His sons!

Brothers and sisters, an effective way of examining ourselves to see if we are indeed sons of God is to honestly estimate whether or not the truths revealed in verses **four** and **five** are the most wonderful and glorious things that we have ever heard of in our lives, for in these two verses, Paul confronts us with the most astonishing and marvelous things that even God Almighty has purposed and planned for us. As we contemplate all that God has done for us, are we filled with wonder and great delight or are we indifferent to it all? If all of this means very little to us, are we really the sons of God? In **1 Corinthians 2:14** Paul wrote, *“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”* Are we natural men or spiritual men? If we are indeed spiritual men, then we should rejoice every time we hear these truths declared.

But let us turn our attention to the word *“adoption.”* It is a very interesting word. The Apostle Paul is the only New Testament writer that uses the word. It is very likely that Paul borrowed the word from Roman law, for it was an idea that the Jews knew nothing about. It was not a part of their legal system. It was however an integral part of the Roman legal system. We do well to remember that Paul was a Roman citizen and he would therefore, have been very familiar with the term and its implications.

The word *“adoption”* is the translation of a Greek word which means “to place, as an adult son.” Thus, the word refers in this context, to the act of God placing the persons whom He had elected, as adult sons. So, the marking out beforehand, the setting of limits upon, the predestinating, had in view the act of God adopting these selected out ones as His sons.

Adoption was a forensic or legal term. Under Roman law adoption secured for the adopted son the right to the name and property of the person who adopted him. The moment the son was adopted, he had the legal right to make such a claim. Roman law also granted to the person who adopted the son, all the rights and privileges of a father.

Paul clearly uses this word in order to cement in the minds of his readers the particular idea of the status of a son. It is vital that we understand and appreciate this idea because we will never enter into all the benefits of our position as sons of God unless we do. The term *“adoption”* emphasizes relationship and position. Its emphasis is not so much upon the **nature** of the son as it is upon the **status** of the son.

A person who has been adopted is not related by blood to the person or persons who have adopted him or her. Their relationship is not a **natural** one but a **legal** one. The person who has been adopted stands as the child of the person or persons who have adopted him or her, even though he or she does not actually partake of their nature. It is this distinction that Paul wants to emphasize here. Our **nature** as Christians is not determined by adoption but by regeneration. By **nature**, we are children of God because we have been born-again. We have received the Holy Spirit and have therefore, become *“partakers of the divine nature”* (**2 Peter 1:4**). But that is not what Paul wants to convey to us by his use of the term *“adoption.”* Adoption does not place emphasis upon the nature which all Christians have. The term highlights the **legal** status, the **legal** position of the Christian, and all the privileges which come with that **legal** standing and position. In other words, adoption may be defined as the legal proclamation of the Christian as a *“new creation”* in his or her new relationship to God as a son. By adoption, we become the sons of God, not merely in a **natural** sense but in a **legal** sense and we are given the rights and privileges that **legally** belong to the members of the family of God.

Paul speaks of this in **Romans 8:15** *“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 apostle, here, uses the illustration of the Roman practice of legally adopting a child, and thus, not only giving to him the material possessions of the one adopting, but also giving him his civil status. Thus, God takes believing sinners, regenerates them, and by means of regeneration, makes them His **children**. The Greek word translated “children” is **teknon**, which literally means “born ones.” Then, He takes these children and places them in a legal position as adult **sons (huios, hwee-os)**.

There is a very great difference between children and sons. The word **children** has to do with our membership in God’s family. We became members of the family of God by virtue of the new birth, by being born into it. The word **sons**, on the other hand, has to do with maturity in the family. It refers to the position we occupy in God’s family as adult sons. For example, if we see a sign on a business establishment that reads, **“John Brown and Sons,”** we know that the sons of John Brown are partners in their father’s business. They have grown up and assumed positions of authority and responsibility in their father’s business. We never see a sign on a business establishment that reads, **“John Brown and Children!”** As God’s sons, we have become partners with Him in His eternal purposes.

Paul speaks to this situation in **Galatians 4:1-6**:

1 Now I say, *That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all;*

2 *But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father.*

3 *Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:*

4 *But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,*

5 *To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.*

6 *And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.*

7 *Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.*

It is by adoption that we become joint-heirs with Christ, having been raised to a civil status as adult sons, thereby, becoming heirs of God. We jointly inherit with Christ, all that He possesses as an heir of God the Father by virtue of His Sonship and work on the Cross. This is one object of God’s predestination. The other is that the believer is to be conformed to the image of God’s Son (**Romans 8:29**). Thus, God selected certain from among mankind to be included within the saving work of Christ, and those selected, He predestined to be placed as adult sons and to be conformed to the image of His own Son. Hence, predestination follows election, not in point of time, for the acts were simultaneous, but in point of divine economy or logical order.

We can perhaps understand now, why Paul used this term “*adoption*.” He was not satisfied with informing us that we have become children of God by way of the second birth. He wanted us to realize what our new status and position is and what are the privileges of our new status and position. Brothers and sisters, our adoption, as **David Martyn Lloyd-Jones** says, is “the highest expression even of God’s love.”

Our adoption by God is one of the guarantees of the completion of our salvation. In **Romans 8:22-25**, we read the following:

22 *For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

23 *And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us.*

24 *We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don’t need to hope for it.*

25 *But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.*) (New Living Translation)

Paul's argument in this passage is that because we are sons of God by adoption, we can be certain that a day is coming when even our bodies shall be redeemed. Our souls and spirits are already redeemed but our bodies are still bodies of sin. They are not yet redeemed, but one day they will be. We can be sure of this because we are sons of God. Our sonship is an absolute guarantee of that. The guarantee of the redemption of our bodies is also a guarantee that one day we will enjoy what Paul refers to in **Romans 8:21** as *"the glorious liberty of the children of God,"* when we shall at last be free from sin and all its evils. This is guaranteed because God is our Father and we are His sons. Because we are the sons of God, nothing whatsoever, can happen to us that God does not allow to happen; because we are the sons of God, all things are working together for our good; because we are the sons of God, there is no accusation that can be brought against us; because we are the sons of God, we need not fear condemnation; because we are the sons of God, we are more than conquerors; because we are the sons of God, nothing can separate us from His love.

Paul goes on to inform us that the act of God placing believing sinners as adult sons was *"by Jesus Christ."* Jesus Christ was the intermediate agent of God the Father to bring to fruition His purpose of placing believers as adult sons. Our Lord did that through His work on the Cross where He satisfied the just requirements of God's law which we broke, making it possible for God to bestow mercy upon a believing sinner on the basis of justice satisfied.

Paul says *"Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself."* What does Paul mean when he says that the placing of believing sinners as adult sons was *"to Himself."* The words, *"to Himself,"* refer, of course, to God. It was He who previously marked us out with a view to placing us as adult sons for Himself, for His own satisfaction, that He might lavish His love on us as His sons, that He might give us the high privilege of sonship and fellowship with Him, that He might be glorified in saving us and receiving from us our worship and service.

All this Paul tells us was *"according to the good pleasure of His will."* The words *"good pleasure"* are the translation of the Greek word **eudokia (yoo-dok-ee'-ah)**. It is used in this context by Paul not strictly in the sense of a kindly or friendly feeling, although this is also included and implied, but because it pleased Him. The word *"will"* is the translation of a Greek word which refers to *"a desire which proceeds from one's heart or emotions."* In this passage the word is used only in relation to the grace of God's dealings with sinful men. It expresses the fact that our election and God's predestinating of us unto adoption are not due to any merit or deserving in us or in anything outside of God Himself. They are acts wholly and solely of His own pure goodness, originating wholly and solely in the freedom of His own thoughts and deliberations.

Brothers and sisters, our salvation is from beginning to end, wholly and solely a work of God.