

The Sons of God

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Almost all English Bibles translate Romans 8:15 as teaching our adoption: "For you didn't receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" So also verse 23 and Galatians 4:5 and Ephesians 1:5, in English translations, refer to our adoption. Many preachers and Christian writers have praised God for His adopting us as His children. Certainly, adoption by the loving, all-powerful God of the universe would be a wonderful thing, and I would be very thankful for it, if it were what the Bible teaches. The thing is, the Bible doesn't teach it. Everywhere the word "adoption" appears in an English-language New Testament, it is a poor translation that does not accurately convey the concept the Holy Spirit is revealing. Fortunately, what the Bible is saying is far greater and better than what we understand in English by the word "adoption."

Adoption Is a Legal Proceeding

There is nothing wrong with adoption. Many people are raised by wonderful adoptive parents. When it comes to our connection to God, however, adoption as we commonly understand it doesn't properly describe that relationship. One of the clues that the word "adoption" in the verses I mentioned is incorrect is the fact that adoption is a legal procedure. Adoption makes one a child of the adoptive parents by law, but it can do nothing about the reality that the child is someone else's child by birth. The Bible, on the other hand, speaks of Christians as undergoing a spiritual regeneration; we are born again (John 3:3, 5). Instead of our going through a legal action, we receive a very real, spiritual rebirth. Our familial relationship to God is not legal, it is spiritual, and we enter that relationship by birth.

The Bible never speaks of Christians as being God's children merely under the law. In fact, it specifically says, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Galatians 5:18). One of the very Scriptures in question, Galatians 4:4-5, says, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent out his Son, born to a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the *huiiothesia* (the word usually poorly translated as "adoption" or "adoption of children")." If Jesus came to redeem us who were under the law so that we could receive the *huiiothesia*, it should

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be obvious that the *huiiothesia* is not an adoption under the law. The *huiiothesia* is a spiritual, living, organic, filial relationship with our Father made possible by Jesus Christ and effected by the Holy Spirit.

Huiiothesia

Another clue that "adoption" is a wrong translation of *huiiothesia* is that *huiiothesia* doesn't mean "adoption." It comes from *huios*—"son"—and *tithēmi*, which means to place or stand something. *Huiiothesia* is sometimes translated as "sonship" (which isn't a bad translation) and is best translated as "standing as a son [or as sons]" or "placing as a son [or as sons]." For whatever reasons, most English translations of the Bible ignore the facts and continue to translate *huiiothesia* as "adoption." *The Bible in Basic English* is one of the exceptions. I like its translation of Galatians 4:4-7:

But when the time had come, God sent out his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, that he might make them free who were under the law, and that we might be given the place of sons [*huiiothesia*]. And because you are sons, God has sent out the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, saying, Abba, Father. So that you are no longer a servant, but a son; and if a son, then the heritage of God is yours.

Galatians 4:4-7

The "heritage of God" is referring to our being heirs of God with Jesus Christ (see Romans 8:17). This directly ties into Paul's use of *huiiothesia*. In the Roman world in which Paul wrote, when a son reached the age of maturity, his father would put him in the official position of his son and heir. The son was always the son from his birth, but this was the recognition that he was now ready to take his rightful place as heir. Remember that *huiiothesia* means "placing as a son," and this Roman custom that would have been familiar to the people Paul was writing to may be what Paul had in mind when he used this word.

Let's read how Paul employs *huiiothesia* in Romans 8:13-19. This time, we'll use *The Complete Jewish Bible*, another translation that properly translates *huiiothesia*:

For if you live according to your old nature, you will certainly die; but if, by the Spirit, you keep putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. All who are

led by God's Spirit are God's sons. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to bring you back again into fear; on the contrary, you received the Spirit, who makes us sons [*huiiothesia*] and by whose power we cry out, "Abba!" (that is, "Dear Father!"). The Spirit himself bears witness with our own spirits that we are children of God; and if we are children, then we are also heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with the Messiah—provided we are suffering with him in order also to be glorified with him. I don't think the sufferings we are going through now are even worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed to us in the future. The creation waits eagerly for the sons of God to be revealed.

Most English translations follow the example of the King James Version, which translates verse 15 as, "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." But this is an imperfect presentation of the parallelism Paul uses. He is not contrasting the spirit of bondage to fear with the Spirit of adoption. He is contrasting the spirit of bondage to fear with the Spirit who makes us sons. It is because we are sons that we can boldly cry out Abba, dear Father! The latter half of the passage says nothing of adoption but clearly says that we are the sons and heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (of whom God also declared, "You are my Son. Today I have become your father," Psalm 2:7; Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5). And yet, although our sonship is now a reality, there is a way in which it is yet to be revealed.

Paul explains this further in Romans 8:23-25. Here, I've used the *Weymouth New Testament*:

And more than that, we ourselves, though we possess the Spirit as a foretaste and pledge of the glorious future, yet we ourselves inwardly sigh, as we wait and long for open recognition as sons through the deliverance of our bodies. It is in hope that we have been saved. But an object of hope is such no longer when it is present to view; for when a man has a thing before his eyes, how can he be said to hope for it? But if we hope for something which we do not see, then we eagerly and patiently wait for it.

Again, most English translations, in poorly translating *huiiothesia* and saying that we are waiting for the adoption, obscure the full truth. The

above translation makes stunningly clear the complete thought that the Holy Spirit is conveying through Paul. We believers have already received the Spirit of sonship—this is a present reality through Jesus Christ, but we still wait by hope to receive the visible manifestation of our sonship—our open recognition as sons—in our glorified bodies at the resurrection.

As Paul points out in Ephesians 1:4-5, God predetermined according to the good pleasure of his purpose our position as sons: "Even as he made selection of us in him from the first, so that we might be holy and free from all evil before him in love: As we were designed before by him for the position of sons [*huiiothesia*] to himself, through Jesus Christ, in the good pleasure of his purpose" (Ephesians 1:4-5, *The Bible in Basic English*).

I will point out that the only other place in the New Testament where *huiiothesia* is used is in Romans 9:4, where Paul uses it to describe the entire nation of Old Testament Israel. Under the Old Covenant, Israel pictured or shadowed or typified God's true sons (regenerated Christians). They entered that role through their physical birth into the nation of Israel and signified it by the circumcision of their males. But it was only a temporary type under the Old Covenant, not the eternal reality we Christians now have under the New Covenant.

Our relation to the Father is not one of adoption. It is the relationship of sons born to their Father, sons who are joint heirs with their elder brother, Jesus Christ, and whose standing as sons and heirs is now a reality but will yet be openly revealed at the resurrection of our bodies.

(Please don't make the mistake of thinking the doctrine of our position as sons and heirs supports the Armstrong and Mormon teachings that our destiny is to be gods. I address this in "Can Man Become God?")
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