

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. More specifically, we have been discussing the wonderful doctrine of adoption, which John Murray called the apex of grace and privilege for a Christian<sup>1</sup>. Last week we discussed the fact that although we are God's adopted children and in one sense Jesus Christ is our older brother, we must also carefully guard the distinction; we must never forget that he is the unique, eternal Son of God, our Savior and our Lord. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I would like to begin by taking a quick look at what Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:3-5; "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will"<sup>2</sup>.

Paul tells us explicitly in this passage that he is praising the Father, not the Trinity as a whole, and he tells us three important things. First, he tells us that the Father chose us in Christ before the creation of the world.

Marc Roby: Which is the doctrine of election.

Dr. Spencer: Right. Without God's electing love, we would all be lost as we discussed before, most extensively in Sessions 129 and 130. The second thing Paul tells us in this passage is the purpose for which God calls us; it is so that we will be holy and blameless in his sight. Which is achieved in a legal sense when God justifies us on the basis of our being united to Christ by faith.

Marc Roby: I notice that you said our being holy and blameless is achieved "in a legal sense" when we are justified. I assume you want to distinguish our being *judged* holy in Jesus Christ from our *being* truly holy and blameless in ourselves.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the distinction I had in mind. We have spoken before about the fact that our justification is not analytic; in other words, it is not based on God looking at us and determining that we are, in fact, righteous. It is, rather, based on the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to us because of our union with him, which is accomplished by faith. It is, as we noted before, a forensic declaration, which is simply a fancy way of saying it is a legal declaration. But, as we will soon see, it is also true that God has changed our nature radically by regeneration and is working in us to change us day by day to be conformed to the image of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 134

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**Marc Roby: Which is the process of sanctification, the next item we will look at in the order of salvation.**

Dr. Spencer: You're right again. But now we get to the third thing Paul said in this passage, which is what I want to focus on today. He said that "in love" God the Father "predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will".

John Murray wrote about this verse, saying, "Here we have the ultimate source and the highest privilege brought together."<sup>3</sup> Remember that we made the point early on that the love of God the Father is the ultimate source of our salvation.<sup>4</sup> So Murray is pointing out that Ephesians 1:5 brings this fact about the source of our salvation together with the specific fact that we were predestined to be adopted as God's children, which he also called the apex of privilege.

**Marc Roby: It is humbling, to say the least, to think that the eternal, sovereign, Creator and Lord of all the universe would love someone as insignificant as an individual believer.**

Dr. Spencer: I completely agree. And Murray then went on to write that "in the consciousness of the sons of God it is inevitable that the assurance of the one [referring to God's electing love] should go hand in hand with the recognition of the other [meaning the fact that we have been adopted as God's children]. The confidence implicit in the address 'Abba, Father' is one that draws to itself the assurance of predestinating love and these mutually support and encourage each other."<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: In other words, the subjective realization that we are God's children provides assurance of the objective fact that God has elected us unto salvation.**

Dr. Spencer: Precisely. In 2 Peter 1:10 the apostle tells his readers to "be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure." Now, we obviously cannot directly examine God's election in eternity past, but we can see its effects in the present. And one of the effects is the confidence we have to call God Abba, Father.

**Marc Roby: Now, we must admit, though, that a person can have a false confidence to call God Abba, Father.**

Dr. Spencer: Oh absolutely, we have to admit that's possible. But we are given a number of specific tests, especially in 1 John, by which we can examine our lives to see whether or not we have been born again. We should always guard against being presumptuous. At the end of the day, what we say about ourselves, or even what others say about us, is not the determining factor. All that matters is what Christ says about us. We see this clearly in Christ's letters to the churches in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 3:1 Christ said to the church in Sardis, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

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<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 230

<sup>4</sup> See Session 177 where we quoted Murray; "No treatment of the atonement can be properly oriented that does not trace its source to the free and sovereign love of God."

<sup>5</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*

**Marc Roby: In other words, their reputation was the opposite of reality. It was a lie.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes it was. We can fool other people, or even ourselves, but we cannot fool God. It is possible for human beings to think we are wonderful, pious Christians and yet for us to still be dead in our sins. And, similarly, in Revelation 3:17 Christ said to the church in Laodicea, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

**Marc Roby: That is frightening, their view of themselves was, again, exactly the opposite of the truth.**

Dr. Spencer: Which serve as a great warning to all of us. God knows the truth. We must seek to be completely honest with ourselves and cry out for God to help us see the truth about ourselves. Being hypocritical in any way will never work. God knows the truth perfectly. But, with that warning kept in mind, if you are able to pray, “Abba, Father” with love in your heart and confidence that you are his child, then that should help to grant you assurance that you are elect.

**Marc Roby: That makes good sense. Do you want to say anything else about this passage from Ephesians?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I do. I pointed out at the very beginning of our discussion that Paul is praising the Father specifically. We can’t divide God of course; he is one God in three persons. But there *are* three distinct persons in the godhead and we are the adopted children of God the Father, not of God the Son or God the Holy Spirit. This goes hand-in-hand with guarding the distinction between Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God and ourselves as God’s adopted children. The Father loves both Jesus and us, but we are not divine, Christ is.

**Marc Roby: In his high-priestly prayer in John 17, we read in Verse 23 that Christ prayed to the Father about his disciples, saying, “I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is an incredible statement; that the Father has loved us even as he has loved Jesus Christ. He is the only eternal, divine Son, but God loves all of his children. And when Christians live together in unity and love as they are called to do it is a powerful witness to the world. According to Christ, when Christians live together in love and unity, it lets the world know that the Father sent him and that the Father loves his people.

**Marc Roby: Which goes along with what Christ commanded his disciples in John 13:35 when Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, love is the distinguishing mark of a Christian. God is love and we are to love God, one another, and even our enemies.

**Marc Roby: Very well. Do you have anything else you would like to say about the doctrine of adoption?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I want to point out that it is a legal declaration by God, just like justification is. By its very nature adoption is legal, or forensic. Adopted children are not natural children. They

are children only because of a legal declaration, not by birth. No one has the inherent right to be adopted by anyone in this life, and certainly we have no inherent right to be adopted by God. But, in John 1:12 we read, “to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”. We were given the right as a gift. And in Romans 8:15 we read, “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.’” This is something we received. And, as we noted before, it is clearly distinct from justification. God could have declared us to be just but then *not* adopted us into his family. Adoption is a distinct privilege, but it is a legal declaration.

**Marc Roby: And what a wonderful blessing it is. I can imagine people in this world thinking it would be a great blessing to be adopted by one of the world’s richest people, but it is infinitely more wonderful to be adopted by God!**

Dr. Spencer: It absolutely is, without any doubt, the most wonderful blessing any human being could possibly have. Not only are our sins forgiven and our punishment taken care of, but we are allowed to have the closest relationship with God that it is possible for a creature to have.

**Marc Roby: Do you have anything more you want to say about adoption?**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I have one more verse I’d like to look at. In Romans 8:23 we read that “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Paul is speaking to Christians in this verse, so we have to ask why he says that they *wait* for their adoption as sons when he has clearly stated just a few verses earlier that those who are being led by the Spirit of God *are* sons of God.

**Marc Roby: That is an interesting paradox, but it is also common in the Bible. For example, it is sometimes said of believers that we *will be* saved, sometimes that we *are being* saved, and sometimes that we *have been* saved.<sup>6</sup> All three tenses are used; past, present and future.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is the same kind of situation. A Christian can properly claim to already be saved in the sense that he is justified in the sight of God and his eternal state is certain. That is the past tense. Simultaneously he can say that he is in the process of being saved because he has not yet been perfected and glorified, that is the present tense. And he can truly say that one day he will be saved in the ultimate sense, which is the future tense.

Similarly, in one sense, all believers have already been adopted by God, but in another sense no one has received his or her adoption in its fullest extent, that will come later when we receive our glorified bodies and come into God’s presence as complete human beings again, with souls *and* bodies.

**Marc Roby: And all Christians should look forward to that with great anticipation.**

Dr. Spencer: Oh, it is our glorious hope. But I want to focus on the present and close our discussion of adoption with a quote from the great English preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He wrote, “Let us never again think of the Christian as just someone who is trying to live a good

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., 1 Cor 3:15 says “will be”, 1 Cor 1:18 says “are being”, and Eph 2:5 says “have been”.

life, trying to be a little bit better than somebody else, a person with a belief in doing certain things, going through certain forms and ceremonials and keeping certain regulations dictated by the church. Christians do all that, but before all that is this vital fact that they are children of God. They have been born again, born from above, born of the Spirit; they have received something of the very nature and life of God Himself. They are transformed people, they are a new creation, and they are thus absolutely, essentially different from those who have not experienced that. That is the very basic thing which the New Testament everywhere emphasizes concerning the Christian.”<sup>7</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is a great quote emphasizing the past-tense aspect of our salvation. While our salvation is not yet complete in this life, if someone has been born again, there have already been significant changes. He or she is a new creation.**

Dr. Spencer: That is important to emphasize, which is why I read the quote. The modern church is drowning in a sea of antinomian teaching that says it doesn't matter how we live because Christ kept the law for us. But that is a gross distortion of the biblical view of salvation.

Being adopted as God's children is a legal change as we noted, but it follows our having been born again, and then repented, believed and been declared just by God. As John Murray noted, “we could not think of one being adopted into the family of God without first of all being accepted by God and made an heir of eternal life.”<sup>8</sup>

**Marc Roby: Yes, that would be impossible to imagine, God could not have children who are not accepted by him.**

Dr. Spencer: No, that would be unthinkable.

But there is another conclusion we can draw from this as well; God is not going to legally adopt us as his children and then leave us to live the same way we used to live. Children emulate their parents. Natural children both look and act like their parents and adopted children, while they may not physically look like their parents, will, over time, come to act more and more like their adoptive parents. And it is the same with Christians. In 1 John 3:2-3 we read, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”

**Marc Roby: What an amazing statement that is, we shall be like God. And it is also what we are commanded to do. For example, Paul commands us in Ephesians 5:1-2, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”**

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<sup>7</sup> M. Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ; Volume Three, Children of God*, Studies in 1 John, Crossway Books, 1993, pg 16

<sup>8</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 87

Dr. Spencer: It's ironic isn't it? Satan's temptation was, and still is, that you shall be like God. But God himself tells us that as his children, we *will* be like God and we are commanded to work at emulating God in this life.

Now, of course, Satan meant the statement differently, he meant that you can *be* a god, with a little 'g', you can be independent of God. Whereas, God means that we will be as much like God as it is possible for a dependent creature to be. We were originally made in the image of God and he is restoring that image through the process of salvation. There is a world of difference in these two understandings of what it means to be *like* God.

**Marc Roby: That statement might win the award for the understatement of the year, there is a completely unbridgeable chasm between these two understandings.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the Creator/creature distinction is, yet again, fundamental. But as God's children, we should be working hard to be like God in the proper sense. The last thing John said in the passage I read is that "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure." In other words, if we have the immeasurably great and certain hope of having been adopted as God's children and being heirs of the promise, if we know that we are destined for eternal heaven in God's presence, we will strive with all of the strength God gives to us to purify ourselves and be pure as God himself is pure.

**Marc Roby: And that is the process of sanctification, which is the next item in the order of salvation.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes it is, and we are now ready to move on to that topic, but it will have to wait for next week. And, since this is the last podcast of 2020, let me close out this very bizarre year, by wishing all of our listeners a very blessed new year. We can all rejoice even in troubles knowing that God is completely sovereign.

**Marc Roby: It has been a strange year, and we certainly hope 2021 brings much less trouble than 2020 had. And let me also remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org) and we'll do our best to answer.**