

Adoption

Abba — What's in a Name?

By Dr. Derek Thomas

Galatians 4:6

Now turn with me to Galatians chapter 4. We were here last Wednesday evening. We saw the Apostle Paul making three assertions. First of all, that there are these folks whom he describes as “under the Law”; under the Old Covenant; first of all, “under tutors and guardians,” as he describes them; a bit like being in kindergarten, but more than that, they are under the Law because they saw the Law and utilized the Law as a way of salvation by obedience to all of its precepts and demands. They were under the Law. And then, secondly, we saw the apostle saying that “Christ came under the Law.” The eternal Son of God became flesh, was born of a woman, and was made subject to the Law. He came under the Law; He came to where we are. And, in the third place, Paul tells us the reason for that: In order that we might receive or rather be made or constituted or reckoned as adopted sons of God.

Now I want to pick up this evening something that we left out last week, an assertion that Paul makes in verse 6 of Galatians chapter 4, and this title, “Abba, Father,” our relationship to the Father. In the course of the next three weeks, we’ll be looking at our relationship to God as our Father and our relationship that we have to Jesus Christ as our elder brother in the family of God. And then, two weeks from now, we’ll take up the role of the Holy Spirit, something that is also mentioned here in verse 6 of Galatians chapter 6. And there's a parallel passage in Romans 8:15. Before we read the section, let's pray together.

Our gracious God and ever-blessed Father, we bow in Your presence. We acknowledge that we could not even come into Your presence apart from Your mercy and grace to us in the Gospel. We thank You that You loved us from before the foundation of the world. We thank You for the sweet and precious message of the Gospel: that You sent Your Son to redeem us, sinners as we are. We thank You now for Your word, and we pray, Lord, that You would open up Your word to us. Give us a longing for Your word. Help us to thirst after You, O God, and make this word to come alive within our hearts, and give us obedient hearts. Help us to read and mark and learn and inwardly digest all that You have for us here to learn. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now hear the word of God:

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

We're in the age of bridgers. Let me explain. Sociologists tell us that the generation that won the Second World War--and there are a few of you out there--you are by the sociologists known, of course, as "builders." Then came the "boomers," the last generation to have, so we are told, a stay-at-home-mom. Then came "Generation X," the ones in search of an identity. And now we have the "bridgers," the ones that bridge the new millennium. Bridgers are said to have the following characteristics: they face an economic uncertainty; they lack moral boundaries; they live in a culture of violence; and they're unclear about gender roles. One third of bridgers — hat's children under 18—don't live with their fathers. And less than half of them spend the entirety of their childhood with both of their parents. America is becoming a fatherless nation.

Tonight I want us to think about our Father in heaven. And to do so, perhaps not with the paradigm necessarily of our own earthly fathers in mind, but to do so with the magnificent portrait of our Father in heaven as He is portrayed for us on the pages of the New Testament. And in particular, here in Galatians 4:6 where Paul reminds us that "Because (we) are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" We are made sons; we are reckoned sons; we are constituted "the sons of God"; and, therefore, we may call Him, "Abba, Father." There are massive statements here, of course, about the Holy Spirit and the cry. Is it we who make this cry? Or is it the Spirit that enables us to make this cry? There's a parallel passage in Romans 8:15, and we'll look at this in about two weeks from tonight: the role of the Holy Spirit in our adoption. But tonight I want us to focus on the Father. Let's think about it for a few moments, shall we?

I. The fatherhood of God is a distinctively New Covenant blessing.

I want to say two things, and then I want to say four things by way of application. But I want to make two general remarks, first of all. The first thing that I want us to see is that this adoptive fatherhood is a distinctively New Testament blessing.

It is a distinctively New Covenant blessing. I'm not suggesting that believers under the Old Covenant, in the Old Testament, never thought of God as their Father. That wouldn't be true...but it would almost be true. The adoptive fatherhood of God is not something that you would find very easily by reading the Old Testament from Genesis to Revelation. Actually, there are some 14 references in the Old Testament to God as *Father*, and in every single instance, it is in reference to the nation of Israel rather than to a personal reference. You can ransack Genesis to Malachi, and you won't find a personal reference to "God as our Father in heaven." That's why it's so apt and illuminating that Paul, when he's talking to the Judiazers here in Galatians 4, these, you remember, were Jews who were insisting that Gentiles be brought under obedience to Old Testament laws: laws like circumcision, laws like table fellowship, and one of the things that the Apostle Paul does here in Galatians chapter 4 is to say that "those things belonged to the age of the infancy of the Church." "You might be an inheritor of all things, but so long as you are under the Old Covenant dispensation, you are like a slave," Paul says. You were like a slave bound to do the Law's every bidding. You were under tutors and guardians. You couldn't go where you wanted to go. Your every step and movement and word was hemmed in by these laws.

And when you step from the Old Covenant and enter into the New Covenant, it's as though you've gone from kindergarten to coming of age. That's the metaphor Paul is using. You may be a son, but so long as you are under these tutors and guardians—and Paul is probably alluding either to the Hellenistic culture of his age or to the Roman culture of his age. In those cultures, until you reached perhaps the age of 25, so long as you were under those tutors and guardians, you were like a slave; you weren't a son. Jim Packer has said that, "You sum up the whole of the New Testament as a revelation of the fatherhood of the Holy Creator." True, by Jesus' time, in the synagogue movement after the destruction of the first and second temple, in the synagogue movement, the liturgical prayers—sometimes known as the Eighteen Benedictions—did have a few references to "God as Father." But it's when Jesus comes, that the fatherhood of God, as it were, explodes onto the pages of the New Testament. Sixty times in the course of the gospels, Jesus refers to His "Father in heaven." The one notable exception is on that cry that comes from His lips on the cross when He quotes the words of the 22nd Psalm: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Think about that for a second. It has profound implications for the way that we think about God.

One of the things that has now been thrust upon me is that I listen to, oh, I don't know, somewhere in the region of about 150 sermons by students at the seminary every year. Every Tuesday and Thursday I get my allotted dose of usually three sermons in succession from students. And students have been introduced to a name that they've perhaps never used and utilized before: it's the name of God, the distinctive covenant name of God found in the pages of the Old Testament—the name *Yahweh*, translated in our English Bibles with capital

letters, LORD, L-O-R-D, to distinguish it from other names that God gives to Himself. *Yahweh*, not *Jehovah* as some of you used to say and learn and as some of our hymns have, but

Yahweh. And we are told, with absolute authority, that it is to be pronounced with a distinctively American accent, “Yah-way!” Now that may be so, although the evidence is lacking

The point is that Jews—I'm talking about *believing* Jews, not just *nominal* Jews—never, never pronounced that name. They were terrified of that name, that name that God gave to Himself in Exodus 3 and following. You remember, the revelation of the bush that burned and wasn't consumed? And God says His name was, first of all, “I am that I am,” or possibly, “I will be what I will be.” And then, a few verses later, shortened and abbreviated to simply, “I am.” And then, just a few verses later in the same passage in Exodus 3, out comes this name that sounds in Hebrew, if indeed that is the correct pronunciation, like “I am.” Now, whatever the facts of the matter are in relation to the pronunciation of those consonants, because there were no vowels in the Hebrew, and the Jews supplied the vowels of another name of God, *Adonai*, or maybe even at times, *Elohim*, in order to pronounce the characters of this name that God had given, the truth is that they were terrified of it. They wouldn't utter it lest they fall foul of taking the Lord's name, the name He'd given to Himself, lest they take that name in vain.

Now, that may have been God's name under the Old Covenant, but there is something remarkable that happens now when we traverse the pages of the Old Testament and step into the pages of the New Testament. And Jesus says, “This covenant Lord of whom you've been frightened even of uttering the very vowels, the very sound of His name, who has made you tremble.” And Jesus says, “He is My Father. He is My Father.” In the context there, God reminds Moses that He is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, as though the name probably was associated with the idea of covenant. This name of God is associated with the fact that God makes promises, and God keeps promises. And one of the clues there in Exodus 3 is that He prefaces it all by saying, “I will be with you,” which is part of what the covenant really means. You remember Moses asked in Exodus if he could see God's glory? And God doesn't actually show him His glory; He reveals to him His name: the LORD, the LORD, “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.” Glory. Yes, glory, but it is not “Father.” That's the point: however glorious, however magnificent, however awesome the name of God is on the pages of the Old Testament in the unfolding of Himself under the terms of the Old Covenant, it still isn't “my Father.” You see, if you were a believing Jew in the time of Jesus, and you came as one of His disciples, and you said, “Jesus, teach me how to pray. I want to be able to pray like You pray.” And He takes His disciples aside, and He says, “When you pray say, ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’” And it takes your breath away. You

see...no, I don't think we do see. I don't think we get it, just how explosive a thing that it was for Jesus to say to His disciples, "When you come into the presence of God, you say, 'Our Father, our Father.'"

II. Christians also call God, "Father"

The second general thing I want us to see is this. Not only is this a distinctive New Testament blessing, but secondly, we are introduced to something that is altogether precious: this is how Jesus talked to God. Yes, this is how Jesus talked to God. Jesus would have, undoubtedly, called Joseph, "Abba," and sixty times or so in the gospels, He uses the same expression to refer to God. Do you remember in the upper room, He says to His disciples - He says it in John 14 and again in John 15 and again John 16, as though He wanted them to remember this - these are His final words on the eve of His crucifixion to His disciples. And he's talking to them about prayer, do you remember? And He says to them, "When you pray, you will ask in My name," Jesus says. And He says that little phrase over and over again: "When you pray, you will ask in My name."

And maybe it means what you've just been doing, what several of you did just fifteen minutes ago, that at the end of your prayer, you say, "in Jesus' name." And all of our prayers ought to be in Jesus' name; it's a result of, and on the basis of, all that Jesus has done as our Savior and Substitute and Lord and Master and Prophet and Priest and King. But maybe Jesus didn't quite mean that: that's not quite what He meant. What He meant was that "when you pray, you will pray in My name, that is, using the same name that I use when I pray." And what is that *name*? Our *Father*, Father, *Abba*. I want you to understand what it means to be a child of the family of God and to have Jesus as your elder brother. It means that we call God by the very same name that Jesus calls God, "Abba."

There's a beautiful passage in John 20--we were looking at it just a few months ago--when Mary Magdalene on the morning of the resurrection — do you remember? And there she is in the garden; she's come, of course, seen the tomb empty, and she's run away. And then Peter and John have come and gone inside the tomb, and now they've gone, and she's left there outside of the tomb. And she looks in, and she can't see anything. And then she's conscious of someone behind her, and she thinks He's the gardener. And she asks Him, "Where have you taken Him? Tell me where you've taken Him so that I might go to Him." And you remember? It's Jesus, and He speaks to her and says, "Mary." And she replies, "*Rabboni*" in Aramaic, which means, "Master." And she must have fallen to the ground or something and just clung onto His legs, crying and weeping and overjoyed and confused and all of those emotions and more. And do you remember what Jesus says to her? "Don't cling to Me because I'm not yet risen to My Father and to your Father, to My God and your God."

Older commentators interpreted that to mean that Jesus was drawing some kind of distinction between the way *He* knew God as His Father and the way *we* know God as His Father. And I think that's a complete misunderstanding; that it's the exact opposite that Jesus is saying. He's saying to Mary Magdalene, "He's My Father, but He's your Father. You call Him by the very same name, 'Abba, Father.'" Can you imagine for a minute...no, you can't...can you imagine the Father's love and concern for His own Son during the days of His humiliation? How He must've looked down from heaven and watched His Son and as it were--just like we do when our children take their first steps, and we want to hold them lest they fall, but we want them to be able to walk by themselves, and we're following them behind, ready to catch them. Can you imagine the beating heart of our Father for His own Son? No, we can't; we can't begin to imagine that. "And that's our Father," Jesus says. That's your Father, and my Father, who trust in Jesus Christ. All the things that we need--provision and pardon and protection--these are the very things our Father in heaven gives to us. And we come, and we call Him by the same name that Jesus calls Him.

III. Application

Now, I want to make four points of application. First of all, what a close relationship we have with God! Adoption brings us into one of the closest relationships that we can ever know and ever experience. There's a wonderful description of John Patton, the Scottish Presbyterian missionary to the New Hebrides of the middle-nineteenth century. And he left, you remember, was it the Island of Anitium, I think, in the New Hebrides with his wife? His wife was to die in labor giving birth to their first born there on the island, and John Patton was in danger of his life almost every day, but he was there and eventually had to leave the island. And virtually, as my memory recalls, virtually at one point, every member of that island had professed faith in Jesus Christ. It was one of those extraordinary blessings at one point that God gave to their missionary John Patton. If you've never read his biography then I urge you to do so, but he had a wonderful relationship with his father. And there is this wonderful scene when John Patton's father is saying good-bye to his son. And you understand, in the middle of the nineteenth century if you were heading for the New Hebrides on the other side of the world, in all likelihood you would never see that person ever again. It wasn't email and internet and chat rooms and back, every three years for six months furlough. When you went as a missionary in the eighteenth, nineteenth century, you were going forever.

For the last half mile or so we walked on together in almost unbroken silence. My father's tears fell fast when our eyes met each other with looks for which all speech was vain. We halted upon reaching the appointed parting place. He grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence and then solemnly and affectionately said, "God bless you my son. Your father's God prosper you and keep you from all evil." Unable to say more, his lips

kept moving in silent prayer. In tears, we embraced and parted. I ran off as fast as I could, and when about to turn a corner in the road where he would lose sight of me, I looked back and saw him still standing, gazing after me. Waving my hat in adieu, I was around the corner and out of sight in an instant, but my heart was too full and sore to carry me further, so I darted into the side of the road and wept for a time. Then, rising up cautiously, I climbed the dike to see if he stood where I left him, and just at that moment, I caught a glimpse of him climbing the dike and looking out for me. He did not see me. And after he had gazed eagerly in my direction for a while, he got down, set his face toward home and began to return. I watched through blinding tears till his form faded from my gaze, and then hastening on my way, vowed deeply and oft by the help of God to live and act so as to never grieve or dishonor such a father.

Well, that may be strange to many of us here, that kind of bond and affection for an earthly father that John Patton had with his. But I tell you, I tell you, if that is not your earthly experience, it is your heavenly experience. Because that's the kind of bond, that's the kind of affection, that He has for us and we have for Him, by the grace of God. It's a close relationship. I tell you, whatever ill you may have, whatever problem you may be passing through, whatever difficulty of emotional or psychological baggage that you may carry into this sanctuary with you this evening; I tell you that the answer to all of that lies at least within this relationship that we have with our Father in heaven. There's the answer. There's the answer to all of our problems. And in that New Jerusalem when we shall gaze upon Him in all His splendor and glory and call Him, "Abba Father," with an insight that goes deeper than words; then when we have been made new in Christ and all sin has been wiped away, the closeness of that bond will be seen for what it is. And that's what you have in foretaste right now, my friend.

Secondly, secondly, reverence. Yes, reverence; yes, Abba; yes, the term that an Aramaic little child might call his earthly father and tug at his sleeve and say, "Abba, Abba, Abba." But also note: not "daddy," I don't think. I know, I go against some of my best friends here, but I really can't, I just can't call God, "Daddy." Because that's a term appropriate for a child, but it's not a term appropriate for an adult--well maybe for some of you--but you know, "When I became a man I put away childish things." It's our Father, but didn't Jesus add immediately, "who art in Heaven"? And there's always this balance of intimacy and fellowship and communion. And we know Him, but He's on a throne too, and "He's God," I say. And He's the Lord, and He's everywhere, and He knows all things, and He holds the world in the palms of His hands.

But there's a third application, and it's the application of freedom. Yes, because that's what Paul is referring to here in Galatians 4: "because you're not a slave anymore." These Judiazers who wanted to bring these Gentile Christians under obedience to circumcision and table fellowship, he says, "It's like being slaves again, but you're not slaves; your children." And do you know when you're

children you have the run of the house? You know if you went to visit the White House, wouldn't that be wonderful? Wouldn't you like to? I suppose many of us would love to go and have a little look in all those various rooms and the bedrooms, all the libraries. You know, you'd like to just step your toes in the Oval Office? And, you know, wouldn't you like, if nobody was looking, to sit in that chair with those windows behind you? But you'd never be allowed to do that--some of you never in a million years. There may be one or two of you who might, but for most of us, that's only a dream. But, you know, if you were the son or daughter of the President, you could do that whenever you wanted. I'm sure in the evening, when business has calmed down a little, I'm sure the children of a President or two has run into that Oval Office and sat in that chair and swung around and pretended, lifted the phone and pretended they were the President of the United States. I'm sure that's happened. My friend, do you understand what Paul is saying here? "As a child of God you have the run of the house." I wonder, do you remember the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son? Do you remember his response when the father killed the fatted calf and gave him his ring? Do you remember what he said? "All these years I've been slaving for you." Ah, there's the rub, you see. Because he thought of his father as a master and a lord and a tyrant, and he saw his relationship to his father as one of slavery and bondage. And I wonder if that's where you are tonight; that you see obedience to God as nothing short of slavery and bondage. And, my friend, you haven't begun to understand what it means to be a Christian, because when you are a Christian, obedience is just gratitude. That's all it is. It's just a grateful heart responding and saying, "Thank you, because I'm freed now."

And there's a fourth application and very, very quickly, and it's the boldness of our approach. "The boldness of our approach," that's what the *Shorter Catechism* teaches us. By the way, the preface to the Lord's Prayer which is, "Our Father which art in heaven," teacheth us to draw near to God with all holy reverence and confidence as children to our Father, able and ready to help us. You and I have a Father who is able and ready to help us.

Whatever your need, whatever your problem, whatever your difficulty, whatever burdens your heart, whatever sorrow you bring with you to this prayer meeting tonight, we have a Father who is able and ready to help you. Just speak His name. Just fly to Him in prayer. We are heirs, you and I, joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Nothing can rob us of this inheritance, nothing. "It hasn't yet appeared what God hath willed for those who love Him." "Fading is the wordling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show. Solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know."

He loves you. Ah, that sounds so trite, doesn't it? He loves you. Do you remember Paul's benediction? "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." The love of our Father! He loves you, I say. Maybe those are the words you and I need tonight, a reminder in this sin-sick world and in our sin-sick hearts that He loves

us with all the profundity that that brings with it. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for all of your mercies to us in the Gospel and for this wonderful truth that you are our Father in heaven. Now bless this word to our hearts, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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