

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 7: ADOPTION — SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE LIVING GOD

The Highest Privilege of the Gospel

Lesson 22

The Cry of the Heart — Abba, Father

The Experiential Reality of Being God's Child

When You Pray, You Are Speaking to Your Father

"The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God"

Key Texts: Romans 8:14–17, 23; Galatians 4:6; Matthew 6:9; 7:11; John 10:27–30; Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 John 3:1

"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."

Romans 8:15–16, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lesson 21 established the doctrine of adoption with systematic theological precision: its definition, its Roman legal background, Packer's claim about its supremacy among the gospel's privileges, its foundational texts in Galatians 4 and Romans 8, its privileges, and the distinction between adoption and regeneration. Lesson 22 is its experiential companion, the lesson that moves from the doctrine of adoption to the lived reality of being God's child. The distinction between the two lessons is the distinction between knowing that you are a child of God and living as a child of God, between the doctrinal establishment of the filial relationship and the moment-by-moment, prayer-by-prayer, suffering-by-suffering, provision-by-provision experience of the relationship that the adoption has established.

The two lessons are ordered deliberately. Lesson 21 front-loaded the theological content so that the experiential application of Lesson 22 rests on a doctrinal foundation rather than floating in devotional warmth untethered to theological precision. The danger of addressing the experiential reality of the filial relationship before the doctrinal content has been established is that the warmth of the relational language substitutes for the precision of the theological category, that "God is your Father" becomes a pious sentiment rather than a specific, doctrinally grounded, legally established reality. The danger of establishing the doctrine without moving to the experience is the opposite: that the adoption remains a theological proposition assented to without being a relational reality inhabited. Lesson 22 completes what Lesson 21 began: it takes the doctrine to the place where it must arrive if it is to do the specific work the Spirit intends it to do, the inner life of the adopted child, the cry of the heart, the experience of being known and loved and held by the God who is specifically, personally, and irreversibly Father.

The governing text of this lesson is two verses from Romans 8 that together capture the essence of what the experiential reality of adoption feels like from the inside: "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" (Romans 8:15–16, NASB 1995). These verses describe not merely what the adoption is (Lesson 21's territory) but what the adoption feels like, sounds like, and does within the heart of the one in whom it has been received. The Abba cry. The Spirit's testimony. The specific quality of the approach to God that the received adoption produces. These are the experiential realities this lesson will develop.

The lesson will proceed through six major sections: the Abba cry in its full first-century significance and its present experiential content; the Spirit's testimony and how the internal witness of sonship operates; the Father's discipline as an experiential reality, the specific pastoral challenge of receiving painful providences as the love of a Father rather than the punishment of a Judge; the Father's provision as the practical expression of the filial trust that the adoption makes possible; the Father's protection and the specific security it provides in the face of spiritual warfare, worldly opposition, and the believer's own vulnerability; and the inheritance of the children, the forward-looking, eschatological dimension of the adopted life that shapes the groaning and the hoping of the present pilgrimage. Throughout, the governing pastoral conviction is stated in the lesson's outline with memorable simplicity: when you pray, you are not petitioning a distant monarch, you are speaking to your Father, who knows your name, who counts your tears, and who will never let you go.

I. The Abba Cry

The Most Intimate Address in Human Language

A. *The Word and Its Weight*

The single Aramaic word at the center of this lesson, Abba, is one of the most significant words in the entire New Testament, and its significance is precisely proportional to its brevity and its ordinariness. It is not a theological term of art, not a liturgical formula, not a word that carries the formal register of official religious address. It is the most natural, most domestic, most intimately familial word a child uses for her father, the Aramaic equivalent of “Dad,” the spontaneous address of a child who takes the relationship with her father for granted in the most beautiful possible sense: she does not approach him with the formal address of the suppliant who must earn the audience, but with the easy, intimate, love-grounded address of the one who belongs in his presence as the most natural thing in the world.

The word appears only three times in the New Testament, and each occurrence is significant. The first is Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane: “Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will” (Mark 14:36, NASB 1995). This is the only instance in the Gospels where Jesus addresses the Father directly in Aramaic, and the specific word he chooses is the most intimate available, used in the moment of the greatest agony of the incarnate life, when the cup of the Father’s wrath against sin was pressing upon Him with its full weight. Even in that moment of supreme cost, or perhaps especially in that moment, the address is Abba. The intimacy of the filial relationship does not dissolve in the moment of the Father’s most demanding requirement; it is precisely the ground from which the submission is offered: not what I will, but what You will, Abba.

The second and third occurrences are the adoption texts: Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6, where Paul describes the Spirit producing the Abba cry within the heart of the adopted child. The significance of these two occurrences lies in their connection to the first: the Abba that the adopted child cries is the same word that the eternal Son used in Gethsemane. The Spirit of the Son (Galatians 4:6) produces within the adopted child the cry of the Son’s own relationship with the Father, which means that the address that the adopted child uses when she calls God “Abba, Father” is not merely a borrowed term of endearment but the specific word that gives her access to the Father through the Spirit of the One whose own filial relationship with the Father is the eternal archetype of hers.

First-century Jewish evidence for the use of “Abba” in prayer is important for understanding the significance of Jesus’ use of the term and the Spirit’s production of it in the adopted child. Joachim Jeremias argued that the use of “Abba” as a personal address to God in prayer was unprecedented in pre-Christian Judaism, that the intimate, childlike address stood out against the formal, reverent address that characterized Jewish prayer. While subsequent scholarship has qualified Jeremias’s stronger claims, the consensus remains that the intimate, familial use of “Abba” as a direct address to God represents a distinctive character of Jesus’ relationship with the Father and the Spirit’s gift of that same relationship to the adopted children. The Abba cry is not merely a warm religious feeling; it is the Spirit-produced expression of a specific, legally-established, Trinitarian-ground relationship between the adopted child and the Father of the eternal Son.

B. The Cry as the Spirit's Work

The grammar of the adoption texts makes clear that the Abba cry is not the believer's own achievement or religious performance but the Spirit's work within the believer's heart. In Romans 8:15, Paul writes: "by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'", the "we cry out" (*krazōmen*) is first-person plural and indicates genuine human participation, but the ground of the cry is the Spirit of adoption who has been received. In Galatians 4:6, the grammar is even more revealing: "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'", the subject of "crying" in the Greek is the Spirit Himself. The Abba cry is simultaneously the Spirit's cry (He is the one crying in the heart) and the believer's cry (the Spirit cries through the believing heart that has received Him). It is the most personal possible expression of the Trinitarian character of the adoption: the Father receives the cry of the child; the Spirit produces the cry from within; and the word of the cry, Abba, is the same word by which the Son addresses the Father.

The pastoral implication of the Spirit's agency in the Abba cry is significant for the believer whose sense of the filial intimacy with the Father is intermittent or uncertain. The Abba cry does not depend on the believer's achieving a certain level of spiritual warmth or emotional readiness before it becomes authentic; it is the Spirit's own work within every adopted child. The believer who approaches the Father with a cold or reluctant or anxious heart is not thereby disqualified from the Abba address; she is in the condition of every sinner who is simultaneously justified and being sanctified, who has the Spirit but not yet the glorified nature. The Spirit who produces the Abba cry is present in the believer whose heart is cold as well as the one whose heart is warm, and His work is precisely to warm the cold heart toward the Father, not to wait until the warming is complete before producing the address.

II. The Spirit's Testimony

How the Internal Witness of Sonship Operates

A. The Double Witness of Romans 8:16

Romans 8:16 provides the most precise description of the internal experiential assurance of the adopted standing in the entire New Testament: "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God" (NASB 1995). The verse is brief and its content is both deeply comforting and theologically precise, but its precision has occasionally been obscured by a misreading of the grammatical structure. The preposition "with" (Greek: *sym*, in the compound *symmartyrei*) is the key: the Spirit testifies "with" our spirit, not "to" our spirit. The distinction matters pastorally. If the Spirit testifies to our spirit, the testimony is an objective divine communication received passively by the human spirit, an external witness delivered to a recipient. If the Spirit testifies with our spirit, the testimony is a joint witness in which both the Spirit and the human spirit are active participants, the Spirit and the believer's own inner awareness together bearing witness to the same reality.

The double-witness reading, the Spirit and the human spirit together, is both the grammatically more accurate and the pastorally more illuminating account of how the assurance of adoption operates in experience. The assurance of the adopted standing is not produced solely by the human spirit's introspective examination of its own spiritual state (that examination is too prone to fluctuation and self-deception to be a reliable ground of assurance); neither is it produced solely by an immediate, unmediated, purely supernatural communication from

the Spirit that bypasses the believer's own participation (which would make the assurance passive and disconnected from the believer's own spiritual consciousness). It is produced by the Spirit working through and with the believer's own spirit, producing within the believing, experiencing, praying human person the conviction of the filial relationship from the inside rather than either imposing it externally or leaving it to be generated by human self-examination alone.

The specific content of the testimony is "that we are children of God", not that we are especially godly, not that our sanctification is proceeding at a satisfactory rate, not that our performance of the Christian disciplines has been adequate, but that we are children of God. The testimony is about identity and standing, not about performance and progress. The Spirit does not testify that we are sufficiently holy to qualify for the family membership; He testifies that we are family members, that the adoption has occurred, that the filial relationship is real, and that the standing is established on a ground that neither the believer's failures nor the enemy's accusations can alter. This is the specific content of the testimony, and it is the specific content that the anxious or troubled believer most needs to receive.

B. Assurance and Its Grounds

The Spirit's testimony with our spirit establishes what the Reformers called the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, as the ground of the assurance of salvation in general and the assurance of the adopted standing in particular. Calvin developed this concept extensively in the *Institutes* in relation to the assurance of biblical authority, but it applies equally to the assurance of personal salvation: the Spirit's internal witness is the ultimate ground of the believer's assurance that the word of the gospel is true and that it is personally true for her. The *testimonium* is not irrational; it operates through the believer's engagement with the Word, the preaching, the sacraments, and the community of faith. But it is irreducible to those means; the Spirit does His own sovereign, personal, inner work of assurance through those means, and the assurance that results is His gift rather than the outcome of a sufficient accumulation of objective evidence.

The pastoral implication of the Spirit's testimony for the believer who lacks assurance of adoption deserves careful attention. The absence of the strong, clear, untroubled sense of the filial relationship with the Father is a genuine pastoral problem that many sincere believers experience. The appropriate pastoral response is neither to deny the problem (by insisting that genuine faith must always feel the assurance) nor to generate false assurance (by encouraging the person to pretend a certainty she does not experience). It is to direct the person toward the means through which the Spirit produces His testimony, the Word of God, which is the primary instrument through which the Spirit bears witness to the gospel's truth; the prayer that is the natural expression of the filial relationship and that the Spirit Himself maintains when the believer's own prayer-voice is uncertain (Romans 8:26–27); and the community of faith in which the Spirit's work in other adopted children confirms and reinforces His work in the one whose own assurance is fragile. The assurance is the Spirit's work, and the believer's part is to remain in the means through which He works, trusting that He will produce His testimony in His own time and in His own way.

III. The Father's Discipline

The Formative Love of the One Who Will Not Leave Us as We Are

A. Discipline as the Expression of Adoption

No dimension of the experiential reality of adoption is more counterintuitive in the moment of its experience, and more recognizable as love in the perspective of retrospection, than the Father's discipline. Hebrews 12:5–11 is the New Testament's most sustained treatment of the Father's discipline as a specific expression of the filial relationship, and its teaching is simultaneously honest about the pain of the discipline and confident about its purpose and its fruit. The passage begins with the call to receive the discipline with neither of the two wrong responses that minimize its value: "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives" (vv. 5–6, NASB 1995).

The two wrong responses name two opposite ways of misreading the Father's discipline: to regard it lightly (to minimize its significance, to treat it as coincidental suffering with no specific divine meaning, to get through it as quickly as possible without attending to what it is doing in the life of the one experiencing it) or to faint under it (to be overwhelmed by its weight, to interpret it as the evidence of divine rejection, to despair under its pressure as if it were the retributive punishment of one who has been finally and definitively rejected rather than the formative love of one who is being thoroughly and permanently kept). Both wrong responses miss the specific character of the discipline: it is neither trivial nor punitive. It is the costly, purposeful, love-motivated action of a Father who is committed to His children's holiness with exactly the same commitment He brings to everything else: infinite, sovereign, and inexhaustible.

The key to receiving the Father's discipline correctly is the distinction between discipline as punishment and discipline as formation. The punishment of the divine Judge is retributive: it is the just exaction of the penalty that transgression has earned, administered in proportion to the offense, aimed at the satisfaction of the violated justice of the holy God. The penalty due to every sin of every believer has been paid in full at the cross, charged to Christ's account and discharged by the propitiation. There is no remaining retributive punishment for the adopted child to undergo, because the justice has been satisfied and the verdict of the justified standing has been pronounced. The discipline of the Father is therefore not the delayed arrival of the retributive punishment that the cross supposedly left unfinished; it is the formative action of the Father who is shaping His child toward the holiness of the Son in whose image she is being conformed.

B. The Purpose and the Fruit of Discipline

Hebrews 12:10–11 states the double purpose and fruit of the Father's discipline with clarity and beauty: "For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (NASB 1995). The comparison with human fathers illuminates both the Father's superiority (He disciplines "for our good" with a consistency and a wisdom that no human father can match) and the ultimate purpose ("that we may share His holiness", the progressive conformity of the adopted child to the character of the Father whose family she has joined).

The "sharing of His holiness" is the most ambitious possible goal for the discipline: not merely better behavior, not merely reduced sin-frequency, not merely improved spiritual performance, but the actual sharing of the divine holiness, the progressive communication of the character of God to the moral and spiritual life of the adopted child. This is the goal that only a Father could set for a child, because only a Father has both the infinite love that

desires this for the child and the sovereign power to accomplish it. The discipline that seems merely painful in the moment it is experienced is revealed, in the perspective of the outcome, to have been the specific instrument of the most intimate possible communication: the sharing of the Father's own character with the child He is forming.

The "peaceful fruit of righteousness" (v. 11) is the experiential outcome that follows the discipline for those who have "been trained by it", who have submitted to the Father's discipline rather than resisting or despising it, who have allowed it to do the forming work for which it was sent. The word "trained" (Greek: *gymnazo*, from which "gymnastics" derives, the vigorous exercise of the body's capacities through consistent, demanding practice) captures the active, repeated, progressive character of the formation that the discipline produces. The fruit is not instantaneous; it is the outcome of a sustained process of being exercised, stretched, and formed through experiences whose difficulty is precisely the instrument of their effectiveness. The Father who loves His children enough to discipline them is the Father who loves them enough to stay with the process until the fruit arrives.

The pastoral word for the adopted child who is in the midst of the Father's discipline is neither "This suffering is meaningless; God is not in it" (which leaves the person without the specific comfort of the filial relationship's explanation of the suffering) nor "You must be under divine punishment for a specific sin" (which reintroduces the retributive logic that the atonement has permanently excluded from the adopted child's relationship with the Father). It is: "Your Father is with you in this. It is His hand, not His punishment. He is forming you toward the holiness you cannot produce on your own. The suffering is real and He knows it; the love is also real and He means it; and the fruit that is coming will be the specific, peaceful, righteousness-expressing evidence that the discipline accomplished exactly what the Father who designed it intended." This is the word that only the doctrine of adoption can provide, in its full content and its full warmth, for the suffering believer.

IV. The Father's Provision

Asking, Seeking, Knocking as a Child

A. *Matthew 7:7–11 and the Filial Trust of Prayer*

If the Father's discipline is the most counterintuitive of the adoption's experiential realities, the Father's provision is perhaps the most daily and most immediately comforting. Matthew 7:7–11 is Jesus' most extended account of the filial trust that the adopted child's prayer to the Father expresses and relies upon: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (NASB 1995).

The three imperatives of verse 7, ask, seek, knock, are all present imperatives in the Greek, indicating continuous, ongoing, habitual action: keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. The prayer that the adopted child is invited into is not the occasional, crisis-driven petition of one who approaches the Father only when the situation is desperate, but the continuous, habitual, natural address of the child who lives in the Father's household and finds herself in conversation with Him as a matter of daily life. The promise that accompanies each imperative, it will be given, you will find, it will be opened, establishes the reliability of the Father's response to the child's

continuous asking. The reliability is not a commercial guarantee that specific requests will be granted in the specific form requested; it is the relational assurance that the Father who hears the child's asking will respond with the wisdom, generosity, and love of the Father who "knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8, NASB 1995).

The a fortiori argument of verses 9–11 is among the most tender in the entire Gospel narrative. Jesus takes the most ordinary and the most universally recognized expression of parental love, the father who responds to his hungry child's request for bread with bread rather than with a stone, for fish with fish rather than with a snake, and uses it as the lower step of an argument whose upper step is infinite: "how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" The "being evil" that characterizes human fathers is not a dismissal of their genuine love but an honest acknowledgment that their love, generous as it is, is contaminated by the selfishness, the impatience, the limited wisdom, and the incomplete knowledge that characterize all fallen human loving. And even they, contaminated as they are, know how to give good gifts to their children. How much more the Father who is in heaven, whose love is perfectly generous, perfectly wise, perfectly patient, perfectly knowing, and perfectly directed toward the genuine good of His children?

B. The Lord's Prayer as the Adopted Child's Daily Conversation

The Lord's Prayer of Matthew 6:9–13 is the most complete expression of the adopted child's daily relationship with the Father available in the entire New Testament, and it is addressed not to the theologian's systematic understanding but to the believer's daily practice. Jesus introduces it with the address that sets the tone for everything that follows: "In this way then pray" (v. 9a), and the address that follows is "Our Father who is in heaven." Not "Almighty God" (though He is), not "Creator and Sustainer" (though He is), not "Divine Sovereign" (though He is), but "Our Father", the specific relational identity that the adoption has established as the primary and governing description of who God is to those who are in Christ.

The Lord's Prayer, read through the lens of adoption, reveals the full scope of the filial relationship expressed in daily prayer. "Hallowed be Your name": the adopted child's first desire is for the Father's honor, the expression of the family love that desires the Father to be recognized and glorified as who He is. "Your kingdom come, Your will be done": the adopted child's participation in the Father's purpose and the alignment of her own will with the Father's sovereign design. "Give us this day our daily bread": the child's natural, daily dependence on the Father's provision, not the anxious hoarding of the one who does not trust the Provider, but the trusting, daily request of the one who knows the Provider is both able and willing. "Forgive us our debts": the child's honest acknowledgment of the ongoing need for the Father's grace, the filial relationship does not make confession unnecessary; it makes it safe. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil": the child's request for the Father's guiding and protecting care. The whole of the Lord's Prayer is the adopted child's most natural expression of the filial relationship: asking, depending, confessing, trusting, and resting in the Father's care.

V. The Father's Protection

No One Can Snatch Them from the Father's Hand

A. John 10:27–30 and the Invincible Keeping

The Father's protection of His adopted children is expressed in the New Testament with the most unqualified language available for describing the security of a relationship. John 10:27–30 provides the most direct and most comprehensive statement of the Father's keeping power: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (NASB 1995). The passage holds together three dimensions of the protection that the adopted child's security requires and receives: the knowledge of the Shepherd ("I know them", personal, intimate, complete), the gift of eternal life ("I give eternal life to them", given, not earned, the life that does not end), and the invincible keeping of both the Son and the Father ("no one will snatch them out of My hand... no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand").

The double keeping, in the Son's hand and in the Father's hand simultaneously, is the most comprehensive possible security: the adopted child is kept by both the eternal Son whose death purchased her adoption and the Father who predestined her adoption before the foundation of the world. The "greater than all" that describes the Father's power in verse 29 is the explicit claim of divine omnipotence applied to the keeping of the adopted children: no force in the universe, spiritual, natural, or moral, is "greater than all" in the sense that could overcome the Father's keeping power. The enemy who seeks to devour ("like a roaring lion," 1 Peter 5:8, NASB 1995) is not greater than all; the world whose prince is under judgment (John 16:11) is not greater than all; the flesh whose deeds are being put to death by the Spirit (Romans 8:13) is not greater than all. Only the Father is greater than all, and He is holding the adopted children in His hand.

The pastoral application of the Father's protection to the specific spiritual experiences of the adopted child's life requires the same distinctions that the discipline section required. The Father's protection does not exempt the adopted child from suffering, from spiritual attack, from seasons of apparent spiritual darkness, or from the persistent struggle with the flesh that characterizes the life of the simultaneously justified and being sanctified believer. The sheep still experience the valley of the shadow of death; the adopted child still feels the weight of the world's opposition and the flesh's resistance. What the Father's protection guarantees is not the absence of these experiences but the inviolability of the adopted standing through them: no experience, however dark or difficult, can accomplish the one thing that the enemy most desires, the removal of the adopted child from the Father's family and the reversal of the adopted standing. The enemy can do many things; he cannot snatch the adopted children from the Father's hand.

B. The Spirit's Intercession and the Father's Response

Romans 8:26–27 provides an additional and deeply pastoral dimension of the Father's provision and protection: the Spirit's own intercession on behalf of the adopted child whose prayer-voice has been silenced by weakness or grief: "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (NASB 1995). The "weakness" that the Spirit helps is not a peripheral weakness that could be overcome with sufficient spiritual effort; it is the fundamental weakness of the creature before the Creator, the not-knowing-how-to-pray that characterizes every believer who has honestly confronted the distance between what she would desire to ask and what she knows the will of God to be.

The Spirit's intercession "with groanings too deep for words" is the most intimate possible expression of the Spirit's participation in the adopted child's pilgrimage: He enters into the believer's suffering and weakness so completely that He carries to the Father the content of the prayer that the believer cannot herself articulate, the longing that goes beyond language, the need that is too deep and too complex and too uncertain for the believer's own words to express. The Father who searches the hearts knows what the Spirit's intercession means, and the intercession, being made by the Spirit according to the will of God, is always heard and always answered according to the perfect will of the Father who knows what is needed better than the one who needs it. The adopted child who cannot pray, who lies before the Father in a silence too grief-laden for words, is not thereby cut off from the filial relationship; she is being carried to the Father by the Spirit of the Son, whose intercession is perfect in its expression and certain in its reception.

VI. The Inheritance of the Children

Groaning, Hoping, and the Eschatological Horizon

A. Romans 8:17–23 and the Co-Inheritance

Romans 8:17–23 develops the eschatological horizon of the adopted life with the distinctive Pauline combination of present suffering, groaning anticipation, and confident hope that characterizes the Christian's posture toward the not-yet consummation. The inheritance that the adoption entitles the adopted children to receive is named in verse 17 with the staggering double description: "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ", heirs of the One who owns everything, sharing the same inheritance as the eternal Son. The inheritance is specified in 1 Peter 1:3–4 as "imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven." It does not deteriorate with time, is not contaminated by the sin that has marked the present age, and cannot be lost or diminished by any force in the created order. It is reserved, specifically, personally, certainly set aside for the one for whom it has been appointed.

Romans 8:18 establishes the proportionality between the present suffering and the future glory that contextualizes the groaning: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (NASB 1995). The present sufferings are real, Paul does not minimize them or pretend they do not exist. But they are not "worthy to be compared" with the glory that is coming, the comparison would be like comparing the brief darkness of a single night with the permanent brightness of an endless day. The suffering of the present age is disproportionate to the glory of the coming age in the direction that makes endurance both possible and worthwhile: the weight of the coming glory infinitely exceeds the weight of the present suffering, and the one who can see both in their proper relationship can endure the suffering with the specific hope-grounded patience that the eschatological perspective produces.

Romans 8:23 names the specific eschatological content of the adopted child's groaning: "We ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (NASB 1995). The adoption is already real in the Spirit's present witness (verses 15–16); the groaning is for the completion of the adoption in its bodily dimension, the resurrection of the physical person in glorified form that will express in the physical creation the full reality of what the Spirit has already accomplished in the spiritual. The groaning is not despair; it is the specific form of hope that belongs to those who

have the first fruits of the Spirit but do not yet have the harvest. The first fruits are real and are already the guarantee of the harvest; but the first fruits are not the harvest, and the one who has tasted the first fruits longs with the specific, legitimate, expectation-filled longing of the one who has been told, and has already tasted, what the harvest will be.

B. The Forward-Looking Life of the Adopted Child

The forward-looking character of the adopted life, the groaning and hoping of Romans 8:23–25, shapes the believer’s entire posture toward the present age. The adopted child knows that the present age, with all its beauty and all its brokenness, is not the final destination; it is the pilgrimage toward the inheritance that has been reserved. The suffering of the present age, however real, is “of the present time”, temporary, bounded, limited to the era before the consummation. The glory of the coming age is eternal, unbounded, and the specific destination toward which the Father’s entire providential management of the adopted child’s life has been directing her from the moment of the adoption.

First Peter 1:3–5 captures the forward-looking posture with the image of the inheritance guarded by the power of God: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (NASB 1995). The living hope is grounded in the resurrection of Christ, the event that is both the prototype and the guarantee of the adopted child’s own bodily resurrection and the entry into the inherited glory. The protection “by the power of God through faith” maintains the security of the pilgrim between the first fruits of the Spirit already received and the full harvest of the inheritance still to come. The Father who adopted, redeemed, and gave the Spirit as the first fruits is the same Father who guards the inheritance and the inheritor with His own omnipotent power until the day of the full revelation.

The pastoral power of the adoption’s eschatological horizon is the specific, grounded, patient, endurance-enabling hope that the present experience of the Father’s discipline, the Father’s provision, and the Father’s protection generates in the adopted child. She is not merely enduring the present age; she is heading somewhere. She is not merely surviving the suffering; she is being formed by it for the holiness whose fullness she will inhabit when the adoption is complete. She is not merely waiting; she is waiting for the inheritance that is already real, already reserved, already guaranteed by the first fruits that the Spirit has already given. This is the life the adoption produces: a life that groans with the groaning of the not-yet, that hopes with the certainty of the already, and that finds in the Father’s persistent love across both the groaning and the hoping the specific, irreplaceable, eschatologically-grounded peace of the child who knows where she is going and knows whose hand is holding her while she gets there.

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.”

Romans 8:18–19, NASB 1995

VII. The Pastoral Power of Adoption

Speaking to Your Father, Who Knows Your Name

A. *The Transformation of the Prayer Life*

The most immediately practical consequence of the doctrine of adoption, when it has been genuinely received and is being consistently inhabited, is the transformation of the prayer life. Prayer addressed to “Our Father” by those who genuinely know themselves to be adopted children is different in character, in confidence, in honesty, and in intimacy from every other form of religious activity. It is not the performance of a religious duty owed to a distant sovereign. It is not the petition of a suppliant who must calculate the adequacy of her own standing before she dares approach. It is not the anxious cry of the unworthy who hope the petition will be received despite the obvious grounds for its rejection. It is the natural, daily, honest, trusting conversation of the child who lives in the Father’s household, addresses the Father as Father, and brings to that conversation all the specific, named, personal content of a life actually being lived in the Father’s care.

The honesty that the adopted child’s prayer can achieve is itself one of the most significant pastoral fruits of the adoption. The child who knows she is loved is free to be honest; she does not need to manage her Father’s impression of her, because the relationship is not built on impression management. The Psalms are the supreme example of what this honesty looks like in practice: the full range of human experience brought before God without editing, the praise of Psalm 103, the grief of Psalm 88, the confusion of Psalm 73, the anger of Psalm 44, the shame of Psalm 51, and the longing of Psalm 42 are all addressed to the same God, in the full particularity of the emotional and spiritual experience that each psalm describes. The adopted child’s prayer is characterized by this same wholeness and honesty: every dimension of the experience is fit for address to the Father, because the filial relationship is strong enough to bear the weight of whatever the child brings to it.

B. *The Adoption and the Whole of the Christian Life*

The doctrine of adoption is not merely the emotional enrichment of an otherwise adequately understood gospel; it is the specific relational framing within which the entire Christian life is properly understood and properly lived. Every dimension of the Christian experience, prayer, obedience, suffering, service, worship, community, witness, takes its specific character from the nature of the relationship in which it is embedded. The prayer of the adopted child is different from the prayer of the anxious slave; the obedience of the loved child is different from the compliance of the performing subordinate; the suffering of the one whose Father is forming her is different from the suffering of the one who has no such Father and no such purpose to give the suffering its meaning. The adoption is the relational matrix within which everything else the Christian does has its truest and most complete meaning.

The specific pastoral word that this lesson has been building toward is stated plainly in the lesson’s own outline: when you pray, you are not petitioning a distant monarch. You are speaking to your Father, the Father who knows your name, not merely as a member of a large class called “believers,” but specifically, personally, as the one He chose in Christ before the foundation of the world and for whom He sent His Son so that you might receive the adoption as His child. The Father who counts the hairs of your head knows your name. The Father who knew you before you were born (Jeremiah 1:5 applies in its typological sense to every image-bearing creature whose life

was known to God before it existed in time) knows your specific circumstances, your specific struggles, your specific grief, and your specific need with the intimate knowledge of the Father who has been watching over His child from the beginning.

He counts your tears. This is not a poetic metaphor for general divine awareness; it is the specific, Psalmic declaration of the personal attentiveness of the Father to the suffering of the child. Psalm 56:8's "You have taken account of my wanderings; put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your book?" is the adopted child's certainty that the grief she experiences is not missed, not dismissed, and not irrelevant to the Father who holds her in His hand. Every tear the adopted child has shed in the Father's name, in the process of being formed by the Father's discipline, in the groaning of the not-yet adoption, and in the longing for the face of the Father she has not yet seen, every one is collected, counted, and will be answered in the fullness of the time when the adoption is complete, the body is redeemed, and the child sees the Father face to face.

He will never let you go. John 10:28–29's "no one will snatch them out of My hand... no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" is not a conditional guarantee subject to the adopted child's sustained spiritual performance; it is the categorical declaration of the invincible keeping power of the Father whose love does not depend on the child's consistency and whose omnipotence is not contingent on the child's spiritual achievement. The Father will not let you go. Not when you fail. Not when you doubt. Not when the enemy screams that the adoption has been forfeited. Not when the flesh is winning more battles than the Spirit in a particular season. Not when the prayers are not coming and the Word is not landing and the community feels distant. The Father is holding you in the hand that no one is able to open, and He will hold you there all the way to the inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and will not fade away.

Theological Terms and Definitions

Abba	Aramaic: the most intimate form of a child's address to her father, warm, familiar, and familial rather than formal or reverential. Appears three times in the New Testament: Jesus' Gethsemane prayer (Mark 14:36), the Spirit's cry in Romans 8:15, and the Spirit's cry in Galatians 4:6. The Gethsemane use establishes the word's character: it is the address of the Son to the Father in the moment of supreme cost, grounded not in emotional warmth but in the bedrock reality of the filial relationship. The Spirit of the Son produces this same word in the hearts of every adopted child (Galatians 4:6), giving the adopted child access to the Father through the word that is the Son's own address, an access that is neither achieved nor maintained by the child's spiritual performance.
Testimonium Spiritus Sancti Internum	Latin: "the internal witness of the Holy Spirit." The Reformed theological term for the Spirit's own work of producing assurance within the believer, specifically, the work described in Romans 8:16 where "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." Developed by Calvin in the Institutes in relation to the assurance of biblical authority and applied to personal salvation: the Spirit's internal testimony is the ultimate ground of the believer's assurance that the gospel is true and personally true for her. It operates through the ordinary means of grace (Word, prayer, community) rather than bypassing them, but it is irreducible to those means: the Spirit does His own sovereign, personal, inner work of assurance through those means, and the assurance that results is His gift.
Symmartyrei	Greek: "testifies with," from the compound sym (with) + martyreo (to testify, bear witness). The specific verb in Romans 8:16 that describes how the Spirit bears witness to the adopted standing: "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." The sym (with) establishes that the Spirit's testimony is a joint witness alongside the human spirit's own awareness, not a unilateral external communication delivered to a passive recipient. The double witness, Spirit and human spirit together, means that the assurance of adoption is neither purely subjective (the human spirit's self-generated conviction) nor purely external (the Spirit's unilateral imposition of certainty), but the Spirit-worked, Spirit-confirmed conviction that arises in the believing, participating human spirit as the Spirit bears His witness within it.
Paideia	Greek: "discipline," "training," "formation", the word used in Hebrews 12:5–11 for the Father's formative discipline of His adopted children. The Greek word carries connotations of the comprehensive formation of the whole person, not merely the correction of specific wrong behaviors but the shaping of character, wisdom, and moral sensibility through sustained, demanding, purposeful training. The paideia of the Lord (Hebrews 12:5) is distinguished from retributive punishment (which the atonement has permanently discharged) as the formative action of the Father who desires the adopted child's sharing in the divine holiness (v. 10) and who employs whatever experiences are necessary to accomplish that formation, including painful ones whose purpose is visible only in the peaceful fruit of righteousness that follows (v. 11).
First Fruits of the Spirit	Paul's description in Romans 8:23 of the Spirit's present gift as the first fruits (Greek: aparchē, the first portion of the harvest offered to God as the guarantee of the full harvest to follow) of the complete inheritance that the adoption entails. The first fruits metaphor establishes both the present reality of the Spirit's gift (the first fruits are genuinely part of the harvest, genuinely given, genuinely present) and the not-yet character of the full inheritance (the first fruits are not the whole harvest; the groaning of verse 23 is the longing of those who have tasted the first fruits and await the full harvest). The Spirit as first fruits is the present-tense guarantee of the future inheritance: what the adopted child already has in the Spirit is the certain pledge of what she will fully have in the resurrection.

Living Hope	Peter's description in 1 Peter 1:3 of the eschatological orientation that the resurrection of Christ produces in the adopted child: "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The hope is "living" (as opposed to dead) because it is grounded in the living Lord whose resurrection is the first fruits and the prototype of the adopted child's own coming resurrection. The living hope is not optimism or aspiration but the theologically grounded, historically anchored, presently operative forward-orientation of the one who knows that the risen Christ has secured the inheritance and that the One who holds the inheritance is the same One who holds the inheritor in His hand. The living hope shapes the adopted child's posture toward suffering, loss, and the not-yet of the present pilgrimage.
Groaning	Paul's description in Romans 8:22–23 of the specifically Christian form of anticipatory longing for the consummation of the adoption: "we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." The groaning is not despair or hopelessness; it is the specific forward-reaching longing of those who have the Spirit's first fruits and await the full harvest, who have been adopted in the Spirit and await the completion of the adoption in the body's redemption. The groaning is the appropriate response to the already/not-yet character of the adopted life: already children of God in Spirit (vv. 15–16), not yet fully expressed as children of God in bodily resurrection (v. 23). The groaning and the hoping coexist in the same person as the two dimensions of the one eschatological posture.
Paternal Intercession	The dual intercession on behalf of the adopted child described in the New Testament: the Son's intercession from the right hand of the Father (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25) and the Spirit's intercession within the believer's own prayer (Romans 8:26–27). The Son intercedes as the high priest who has offered the atoning sacrifice and now maintains the access it secured; the Spirit intercedes as the one who takes up into His own groaning the prayer that the believer cannot herself articulate, the "groanings too deep for words" that carry to the Father the content of the prayer that weakness and grief have silenced. Together, the two intercessions establish the comprehensive character of the Father's provision for the adopted child's approach to Him: she is always, in every condition, being represented before the Father by both the Son and the Spirit.
Imperishable Inheritance	1 Peter 1:4's description of the eschatological inheritance that the adoption entitles the adopted children to receive: "imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven." Imperishable (aphthartos): it does not deteriorate, decay, or end. Undefiled (amiantos): it is not contaminated by the sin that has marked the present age or the present life of the inheritor. Will not fade away (amarantos): it does not diminish as the ages progress. Reserved (tērēmenos): it is specifically set aside, actively guarded, personally appointed for the one for whom it has been prepared. The threefold negation (not perishable, not defiled, not fading) contrasts the inheritance with every earthly inheritance, which is subject to all three: deterioration, contamination, and diminishment. The imperishable inheritance is the final expression of the adoption's permanent character.
Greater Than All	Jesus' description of the Father's power in John 10:29 ("My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all"), applied to the Father's keeping of the adopted children. "Greater than all" is the claim of divine omnipotence in relation to every force that might threaten the security of the adopted standing: the enemy, the world, the flesh, spiritual powers, natural forces, death itself. None of these is "greater than all" in the sense that could overcome the Father's keeping power. The pastoral significance: the adopted child's security does not depend on the adequacy of her own spiritual resistance to these forces (which is always incomplete and sometimes insufficient) but on the adequacy of the Father's power to keep her through them. The Father is greater than all; the adopted child is in the Father's hand; therefore the adopted child is secure.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the Abba cry is not the spiritual achievement of the advanced believer but the birthright of every adopted child in whom the Spirit of the Son dwells. This means that the cold-hearted approach to prayer, the uncertain approach to God, the tentative “I hope He is listening” that characterizes so much of the Christian’s average experience of prayer is not the authentic expression of the filial relationship that the adoption has established, it is the spirit of slavery operating in the life of one who is actually free. The truth that must be believed is not merely that God is our Father in some generic doctrinal sense but that the Spirit of the Son, whom we have received, is producing within us the same Abba cry that the eternal Son addressed to the Father in Gethsemane, and that this cry is the most authentic thing we will ever say, because it names the most real relationship we have.

We must believe that the Father’s discipline is love, specifically and without qualification. This is among the hardest truths in the whole of the Christian experience to maintain in the moment of the discipline’s administration, because the experience of pain is not self-evidently loving, it requires the doctrinal framework of the adoption and the authority of the inspired Word to interpret it correctly. But the belief is not a matter of pretending the pain does not hurt or that the discipline is secretly pleasant; it is the theologically grounded conviction that the Father who is using this specific painful experience to form this specific adopted child toward the holiness He desires for her is doing so with the love that created the cosmos and gave the Son and sent the Spirit. The pain is real; the love is realer. Both are simultaneously and consistently true.

We must believe that the inheritance is real, reserved, and certain, that the groaning of the not-yet is the groaning of the heir who already has the first fruits and is waiting for the harvest, not the groaning of the orphan who has nothing and hopes for something. The difference between the two kinds of groaning is infinite, and it is the difference that the doctrine of adoption establishes. The adopted child groans as the one who has already received the Spirit as the first fruits, who has already been loved, redeemed, named, and indwelt, and who longs for the completion of what has already so magnificently begun. The groaning is forward-leaning, hope-filled, expectation-grounded; it is the groan of the pilgrim who has tasted the inheritance and cannot be satisfied with anything less.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Desire the transformation of your prayer life that comes from genuinely inhabiting the Abba address. Not merely using the word “Father” as the conventional opening of a prayer, but receiving the specific relational weight of the word every time it is spoken: this is my Father. He knows my name. He knows what I need before I ask. He is greater than all the things I am afraid of. He has counted my tears and will answer every one of them. He will never let me go. Let the theological weight of the adoption, the specific, doctrinally established, Spirit-attested reality of the filial relationship, fill the word “Father” with its full content every time it is addressed in prayer, until the prayer that begins “Our Father” is always and genuinely the address of the child to the Father who is real, present, and specifically attentive.

Desire the specific comfort that the Father’s keeping produces in the face of spiritual warfare. John 10:28–29’s “no one will snatch them out of My hand... no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” is the specific doctrinal comfort for the believer who feels most vulnerable, whose faith is most fragile, whose spiritual defenses are most depleted, whose sense of the enemy’s pressure is most acute. In those moments, desire not the

generated confidence of human spiritual effort but the specific, externally-grounded, Father-based security of the one who knows that the keeping is not her own achievement but the Father's invincible holding. She is not holding on; she is being held. And the one who holds her is greater than all.

Desire for those in your pastoral care the specific experience of being genuinely known and genuinely loved by the Father, not in the abstract but in the specific particularity of their daily lives, their specific sufferings, their specific griefs, and their specific needs. The adopted child who has understood that the Father counts her tears and knows her name is a different kind of believer from the one who relates to God primarily as the omnipotent sovereign who has granted her a favorable verdict. The first is a child in the Father's household; the second is a subject in the King's court. Both are real; both are true; but the first is warmer, more personal, more sustaining in the specific pastoral crises of the Christian life, and more accurately reflective of what the adoption has actually established.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Practice the "Abba, Father" address as the deliberate opening of every prayer for one week, not merely as a verbal formula but as the conscious reception of the specific relational truth it names. Before saying anything else in prayer, pause and receive the word "Father" with the full content of what the adoption has established: He is your Father specifically. He chose you before the foundation of the world. He sent His Son so that you might receive the adoption. He sent the Spirit of the Son to produce this cry within your heart. He knows your name, counts your tears, and will never let you go. Only then proceed with the content of the prayer. Report to your study group at the week's end what effect this deliberate pause and reception had on the character of your prayers.
- Read through the entire Psalter, or, if that is too large for the current week, read through Psalms 22, 42, 51, 73, 88, 103, 130, and 139, as the adopted child's prayer book, noticing the full range of human experience that is brought honestly before the Father in the psalms: the praise of 103, the abandonment of 22, the grief of 42, the shame of 51, the confusion of 73, the darkness of 88, the penitence of 130, and the all-knowing intimacy of 139. Ask: which of these psalms most accurately describes my current experience of the Father's presence or absence? Which expresses the specific form of groaning that characterizes my current season? And what does it mean that all of these, including the darkest, are addressed to "You" (the Father), indicating that the darkest experiences are still contained within the filial relationship rather than outside it?
- Identify a specific experience of painful suffering or difficult providence in your current life, something that is causing real grief, confusion, or strain. Bring it before the Father in the specific light of Hebrews 12:5–11: not asking "Why is this happening to me?" (which is a natural question but not the final question) but asking "What is the Father forming in me through this?" and "What share of His holiness is this discipline aiming to produce?" Ask for the eyes to see the paternal love in the painful providence, and ask for the patience to be trained by it rather than merely enduring it. Write down what you believe the Father may be forming in you through this specific experience, and bring your answer to your study group for their prayer and reflection.
- Read Romans 8:26–27 as the specific pastoral word for the times when you cannot pray, when grief, confusion, exhaustion, or spiritual darkness has silenced your prayer voice. Receive the Spirit's intercession with the specific, personal comfort it provides: the Spirit is taking to the Father the prayer you cannot articulate, in the language that is beyond your words, and the Father who searches the hearts knows exactly what the Spirit's groaning means. Identify one person in your pastoral care who is currently in a season of

not being able to pray, whose grief or depression or spiritual crisis has silenced the prayer voice. Prepare a specific pastoral word for that person from Romans 8:26–27 and Hebrews 7:25: the Son is interceding from the Father’s right hand; the Spirit is interceding from within your heart; you are being carried to the Father by both, and the Father hears every word.

- Memorize and meditate on John 10:27–29 for one week as the specific declaration of the Father’s keeping power over the specific things that most threaten your sense of spiritual security. Each day, identify the specific threat, the enemy’s accusation, the flesh’s persistent rebellion, the world’s opposition, the circumstance that feels most destabilizing, and address it with the specific declaration of verse 29: “My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all.” Not as a formula to be repeated but as the specific, theologically grounded, personally applied confidence of the one who knows that the Father holding her is greater than the thing threatening her. Let the specific keeping power of the Father displace the specific fear, one day at a time, one specific threat at a time.

Key Texts: *Romans 8:14–17, 23, 26–27; Galatians 4:6; Mark 14:36; Matthew 6:9–13; 7:7–11; John 10:27–30; Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 John 3:1; 1 Peter 1:3–5; Psalm 56:8; Psalm 88*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- The lesson opens by describing the difference between knowing you are a child of God (Lesson 21's doctrinal territory) and living as a child of God (Lesson 22's experiential territory). Where would you honestly locate yourself on that spectrum at this moment? Do you know the doctrine of adoption in its theological precision and find it generally true, or do you genuinely live in the specific, moment-by-moment, prayer-by-prayer experiential reality of being God's adopted child? And what specific aspects of the experiential reality, the Abba cry, the Spirit's testimony, the Father's discipline, provision, protection, and the inheritance, are most vividly real to you, and which are most difficult to inhabit in actual experience?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 8:14–17. What is the description of sons of God in verse 14 (“all who are being led...”)? In verse 15, what is the contrast between the two “spirits” (“not... but...”)? and what does each produce? What is the specific Greek preposition in the compound verb of Romans 8:16 (sym-martyrei, does the Spirit testify to our spirit or with our spirit, and why does the difference matter)? In verse 17, what is the full description of the inheritance (“heirs of... and fellow heirs with...”), and what is the condition appended to the glorification (“if indeed we...”)? How does this condition relate to the teaching on the Father's discipline in Section III of this lesson?
- Read Romans 8:26–28. In verse 26, what specific weakness does the Spirit help, and what is the character of the Spirit's intercession (“with groanings...”)? In verse 27, what are the two grounds on which the Father receives and understands the Spirit's intercession (“He who searches... knows what... because...”)? In verse 28, what is the promise, and who are the specific beneficiaries (“to those who... who are...”)? How do verses 26–27 address the pastoral situation of the adopted child who cannot pray in the ordinary sense?
- Read Hebrews 12:1–11. What is the specific athletic metaphor in verses 1–2 (“with endurance... run the race... fixing our eyes on...”), and how does the reference to Jesus as “the author and perfecter of faith” (v. 2) ground the endurance? In verses 5–6, what two wrong responses to discipline are named, and what is the specific relationship between the Lord's love and His discipline? In verse 8, what does the absence of discipline reveal about a person's relationship to God? In verses 10–11, what is the comparison between human fathers' discipline and the Father's discipline (purpose of each), and what does the word “trained” (gymnazo) suggest about the character of the discipline process?
- Read John 10:27–30. What three things does Jesus say about His relationship with His sheep (verses 27–28: “My sheep hear... I know... they follow... I give...”)? What is the specific double declaration of security in verses 28–29 (“no one will... no one is able...”), and whose hands are named as the place of keeping? What is the specific basis of the Father's keeping power in verse 29 (“My Father... is greater than...”), and what does “greater than all” imply about the scope of the threats the Father's power is sufficient to overcome? And how does verse 30 (“I and the Father are one”) establish the completeness of the security by uniting the two Persons in whose hands the sheep are held?
- Read 1 Peter 1:3–5. What three elements of the inheritance are named in verse 4 (imperishable, undefiled, and will not fade away), and what does each element specifically address about the threats to earthly inheritances? What is the specific action described as “reserved in heaven for you” (v. 4), and what does the passive participle suggest about who is doing the reserving? In verse 5, what is the protection that keeps

the inheritor safe until the inheritance is received, and through what instrument is this protection applied? How does the resurrection of Christ in verse 3 (“born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”) ground the certainty of the inheritance?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the Abba cry is simultaneously the Spirit’s cry (Galatians 4:6: the Spirit cries “Abba, Father”) and the believer’s cry (Romans 8:15: “by which we cry out”), and that this dual agency is the appropriate description of how the Spirit produces the filial address within the believer’s heart. Evaluate this interpretation. What is the significance of the dual agency for the believer’s experience of the Abba cry, is it experienced as something entirely done by the Spirit (passive for the believer) or as something genuinely the believer’s own expression (active)? And what pastoral implications follow from the dual agency: specifically, is the absence of felt warmth in the Abba address a reason to doubt the genuineness of the adoption, or does the Spirit’s agency in the cry mean that the cry’s authenticity does not depend on the believer’s emotional readiness?
- The lesson distinguishes the Father’s discipline from retributive punishment on the grounds that the atonement has permanently discharged every retributive penalty. But Hebrews 12:6 says that “the Lord scourges every son whom He receives”, using the language of severe physical punishment. How does the doctrine of the atonement’s full satisfaction of retributive justice coexist with the language of the Father’s scourging? Is the scourging retributive or formative? And how would you explain the difference to a Christian who is in the midst of severe suffering and wondering whether God is punishing her for a specific sin?
- Romans 8:28’s promise that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose” is one of the most cited and most comfort-sought verses in the New Testament. But it is also frequently misunderstood in ways that produce either false comfort (everything will be pleasant) or pastoral damage (if things are not going well, you must not love God sufficiently). How does the specific context of Romans 8, particularly the preceding verses on the Spirit’s intercession (vv. 26–27) and the following verses on the golden chain (vv. 29–30), establish the specific content of the “good” that all things work together for? Is it comfort, protection from difficulty, or something more specifically eschatological?
- The lesson presents the Spirit’s “groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26) as the Spirit’s intercession on behalf of the adopted child who cannot herself pray. The Reformed tradition has generally interpreted these groanings as the Spirit’s intercessory activity rather than as the believer’s own Spirit-prompted groaning. Evaluate this interpretation. Does the grammar of the passage support the Spirit as the subject of the groaning, or the believer as the subject whose groaning the Spirit takes up? And what pastoral difference does the interpretation make: is the comfort that the passage provides primarily about the Spirit’s activity on the believer’s behalf when she cannot pray, or about the Spirit’s deepening of the believer’s own prayer beyond what her words can express?
- The lesson presents the already/not-yet of the adoption (already real in the Spirit’s witness, not yet complete in the body’s redemption) as producing the specific “groaning and hoping” posture of the adopted child’s life. Compare this with the already/not-yet of justification and of sanctification. Is there a temporal “not-yet” of justification (i.e., a dimension of the justified standing that awaits eschatological completion)? Is there a temporal “already” of sanctification (i.e., a dimension of sanctification that is already completed rather than merely in process)? How do the different temporal structures of justification, adoption, and

sanctification illuminate the comprehensive already/not-yet character of the whole of the Christian's eschatological existence?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the Abba address transforms the prayer life by establishing the specific relational character of the approach to God. Examine your own prayer life honestly: is it more characterized by the filial intimacy of the Abba address (trusting, honest, continuous, specific) or by the spirit of slavery (formal, anxious, performance-calibrated, uncertain of welcome)? What specific beliefs about God, about your own standing before God, or about the nature of prayer most contribute to the spirit of slavery in your prayers? And what specific changes in your understanding of who God is to you, Father rather than Judge, provider rather than supervisor, keeper rather than assessor, would most directly transform the character of your prayer?
- The lesson describes the Father's discipline as the formative love of the One who will not leave us as we are. Identify a specific painful providence in your past, a loss, a failure, a disappointment, a sustained difficulty, that you can now, with the perspective of time, see as the Father's formative discipline producing the "peaceful fruit of righteousness" that Hebrews 12:11 describes. Name the specific fruit: what specific dimension of your character, your faith, your dependence on God, or your love for others was formed by that specific difficulty? And how does identifying the fruit of past discipline help you receive the current painful providences as the Father's formative love rather than His retributive punishment?
- The lesson closes with three declarations: the Father knows your name, counts your tears, and will never let you go. Of these three declarations, which do you find most difficult to receive as personally true, not as generally true of believers in the abstract, but as specifically true of you? What specific experiences, theological misunderstandings, or emotional patterns make it difficult to receive that particular declaration as personally addressed to you? And what specific biblical text, from this lesson or from the broader Scriptural testimony, most directly addresses the specific difficulty?
- Romans 8:26–27's teaching that the Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words addresses the specific pastoral situation of the believer who cannot pray. Think of the person in your pastoral care who is currently in this situation, who is so overwhelmed by grief, depression, spiritual crisis, or exhaustion that the prayer voice has been silenced. What does the Spirit's intercession mean specifically for that person? How would you communicate this truth to them in a way that is both theologically precise and pastorally warm, that gives them the specific comfort of knowing they are being carried to the Father rather than the false comfort of telling them everything will be fine?

Prayer Focus

Begin this lesson's prayer time in silence. Not the silence of the person who has nothing to say, but the deliberate silence of the one who is attending, waiting to receive, before speaking, the specific relational weight of the word that is about to be spoken. Hold the word "Father" in your mind for thirty seconds before you speak it. Let it come with all the content that the two lessons on adoption have deposited in your understanding: the predestined adoption before the foundation of the world; the Son sent in the fullness of time to redeem those under the law so that you might receive the adoption; the Spirit of the Son sent into your heart to produce this cry; the filial relationship legally established, relationally real, permanently secured. Then, from that fullness, speak the word: "Abba, Father." And let everything that follows in the prayer be the natural content of the relationship it has named.

Pray through Matthew 7:7–11's description of the Father's provision as the framework for the specific requests of this prayer time. Name the specific needs you are bringing to the Father, not the generic or the theologically safe requests, but the specific, named, particular needs of this specific week in this specific life. For each one, receive the specific promise of the a fortiori argument: if a human father who is evil gives bread and fish to his hungry child, how much more will your Father in heaven give what is good to those who ask? Name the good that you are asking for. Trust the promise. Ask with the confidence of the child who knows that the Father to whom she is asking has both the power to give it and the love that desires to, and the wisdom to give it in the form that is genuinely good rather than the form that only appears to be. And leave the form to the Father, trusting that His knowledge of what is good for you exceeds your own.

Pray with the specific honesty that the Psalms model and that the filial relationship makes possible. Choose one psalm that most accurately describes your current experience of God, whether it is the praise of Psalm 103, the confusion of Psalm 73, the grief of Psalm 88, the shame of Psalm 51, or the longing of Psalm 42, and pray it as your own prayer, in your own words, bringing the specific content of your current experience to the Father with the same honesty that the psalmist brought his. The filial relationship is strong enough to bear the weight of what you actually feel; the Father who receives the honest lament is the same Father who receives the exultant praise. He is not surprised by your grief; He is not threatened by your confusion; He is not scandalized by your doubt. He is your Father. He can handle your honesty. And the honesty He receives from the child who trusts Him enough to be honest is more pleasing to Him than the performed piety of the one who says what she thinks she is supposed to say.

Pray for the person in your pastoral care whose prayer voice has been most silenced, whose grief or depression or spiritual crisis has brought them to the place where the words will not come. Pray for them not merely in the sense of asking God to help them, but in the specific sense that Romans 8:26–27 describes: as the one who is standing alongside them, bringing to the Father the prayer they cannot articulate, adding your own intercession to the Spirit's groanings on their behalf. Name them before the Father. Name what you believe they are groaning about, even if they cannot say it themselves. Ask the Father to make the Spirit's intercession more real to them than it currently is, and to bring them to the awareness that they are being carried to the Father by the Spirit of the Son even in the silence. And ask for wisdom for the specific pastoral conversation you will have with them about their silence.

Close with John 10:27–30 as the corporate declaration of the adopted children’s security in the Father’s hand. Read it aloud, slowly, attending to each phrase: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” Receive “I know them” as addressed specifically to you. Receive “I give eternal life” as the gift you have received. Receive “no one will snatch them out of My hand” as the declaration of your security. Receive “greater than all” as the description of the power that is holding you. And receive “I and the Father are one” as the ultimate ground of the security, the unity of the divine Persons in whose hands you are permanently and invincibly held.

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”

John 10:27–29, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 8:14–17, 23, 26–28; Galatians 4:6; Mark 14:36; Matthew 6:9–13; 7:7–11; John 10:27–30; Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 Peter 1:3–5; 1 John 3:1; Psalm 56:8; Psalm 88

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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