

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 5: THE SPIRIT AND THE APPLICATION OF REDEMPTION

Lesson 14

The Spirit and Adoption

Sons and Daughters of God

The Spirit Who Cries “Abba, Father!” in Our Hearts

Key Texts: Romans 8:14–17, 23; Galatians 4:4–7; Ephesians 1:5; 1 John 3:1–2

“See How Great a Love the Father Has Bestowed on Us, That We Would Be Called Children of God”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

The *ordo salutis* has brought us through effectual calling (Lesson 11), regeneration (Lesson 12), and conversion, repentance and faith (Lesson 13). Each of these acts is the Spirit's work: He calls, He regenerates, He grants repentance, He gives faith. Now, with Lesson 14, we arrive at one of the most emotionally and devotionally rich doctrines in all of Christian theology, a doctrine that stands at the meeting point of legal standing and personal experience, of divine sovereign decree and the warmth of intimate relationship: adoption.

Adoption is the act of God by which those who were by nature children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3), alienated from God, estranged from the household of faith, without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12), become, by sovereign grace, children of God and heirs of the eternal inheritance that Christ has secured. It is, in the most literal sense possible, the most extraordinary status change in the universe: from being enemies of God to being His beloved children; from being under condemnation to being under the Father's protective, providential care; from being orphans in the cosmos to belonging to the family of the living God.

The pneumatological dimension of adoption is profound and specific. Every act in the *ordo salutis* is the Spirit's work, but adoption has a particularly intimate pneumatological character that sets it apart: the Spirit of God does not merely confer adoptive status and leave the believer to live with its implications at arm's length. He enters into the heart of the adopted child and cries out, not merely informs, not merely testifies in an abstract juridical sense, but cries out in the language of the most intimate family relationship, "Abba, Father!" (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). The Spirit does not merely declare that God is your Father; He causes you to experience that Fatherhood in the most visceral, most personal, most existentially immediate way possible. The cry of "Abba!" is not a theological proposition about divine paternity; it is the heartfelt, Spirit-wrought, experiential cry of a child who knows, not merely believes, but knows in the depths of the soul, that the God of the universe is his Father.

This lesson will examine adoption's definition and its relationship to the other saving acts of the *ordo*; the crucial pneumatological texts of Romans 8:14–17 and Galatians 4:4–7; the Spirit's specific work as the Spirit of adoption; the witness of the Spirit to our adoptive status; the privileges that adoption confers; and the eschatological dimension that keeps adoption oriented toward the future completion of what the Spirit has begun. Throughout, the pastoral warmth of this doctrine will be the constant companion of its theological precision, for adoption is, above all else, the doctrine that tells the believer that he is not an orphan in a hostile cosmos but a beloved child in his Father's house.

I. Adoption Defined and Distinguished

A Change of Legal Standing, Not Merely of Nature

A. The Meaning of Adoption

Adoption (Greek: *huiiothesia*, literally, “son-placing” or “placing as a son”; Latin: *adoptio*) is the legal act by which God constitutes sinners as His children and heirs, granting them the full rights and privileges of sonship in His family. The word *huiiothesia* appears five times in the New Testament, all in the Pauline letters (Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5), and in each case it carries the weight of a specific legal-relational category rather than merely a metaphorical description of spiritual experience. In the Greco-Roman world, adoption (*adoptio*) was a legal act with specific consequences: the adopted person ceased to belong to his former family, was incorporated into the new family with all its rights and responsibilities, and became heir to the adopting father’s estate on equal footing with biological children. Paul’s use of this language carries these legal-relational implications into the theological sphere.

Adoption is distinguished from regeneration, with which it is closely related and which it frequently accompanies. Both are acts of God’s sovereign grace applied by the Spirit at conversion. But they are conceptually distinct: regeneration is an ontological change, it changes what the believer is by nature, creating a new spiritual nature with new desires, new capacity for spiritual perception, and new orientation toward God. Adoption is a legal-relational change, it changes the believer’s status before God, constituting him as a child and heir rather than an alien and an enemy. The regenerate person has a new nature; the adopted person has a new standing. The regenerate person is a new creation; the adopted person is a family member. Both are simultaneously true of every genuine believer, but they address different dimensions of the transformation that grace accomplishes.

Adoption is also distinguished from justification, with which it is equally closely related. Justification is the forensic act by which God declares the believing sinner righteous on the basis of Christ’s imputed righteousness, a change of legal status from condemned to acquitted. Adoption is the relational act by which God constitutes the justified sinner as His child, a change of relational status from stranger to son. Both are forensic in the sense of involving legal declaration, but justification addresses the sinner’s guilt and acquittal while adoption addresses the sinner’s alienation and welcome. The justified sinner is no longer condemned; the adopted sinner is no longer an orphan. Justification deals with the court; adoption deals with the family.

B. The Foundation of Adoption: Ephesians 1:5

The ultimate ground of adoption is established in Ephesians 1:5, where Paul traces it to the eternal, sovereign, gracious purpose of the Father: “He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will” (NASB 1995). Three elements of this verse demand attention. First, adoption is predestined: it is not a divine afterthought or a divine response to human initiative; it is the eternal, sovereign purpose of the Father determined before the foundation of the world. The doctrine of adoption is not a small addendum to salvation; it is the pre-temporal divine intention toward which the entire economy of redemption is directed. Second, adoption is through Jesus Christ: it is accomplished

by means of the Son's incarnation, obedience, and atoning death, by which He secured for His people the full rights of sonship that sin had forfeited. Third, it is according to the kind intention of His will: the Father's motive is His own sovereign, gracious, free love, not anything in the adoptee that merited such extraordinary grace.

II. The Spirit of Adoption: Romans 8:14–17

You Have Not Received a Spirit of Slavery Again to Fear

A. The Spirit Who Leads Sons

Romans 8:14–17 is the central Pauline text on the Spirit's role in adoption, and it moves in a single fluid argument from the Spirit's leading to the Spirit's witness to the inheritance that awaits: "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery again to fear, 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, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (Romans 8:14–17, NASB 1995).

Verse 14 establishes the criterion for sonship in pneumatological terms: "all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." The mark of the adopted sons and daughters of God is not a particular religious experience, not a level of moral achievement, not a specific charismatic gift, it is being led by the Spirit. The present passive participle (*agontai*, are being led) indicates an ongoing reality: sons of God are, characteristically and continuously, those who are under the Spirit's direction. The Spirit leads, and the sons follow, not with the mechanical compliance of automata but with the willing, responsive obedience of those who have been given a new nature oriented toward the Father's will.

Verse 15 introduces the critical contrast between two spirits, or, more precisely, between two pneumatological modes of relationship with God: "For you have not received a spirit of slavery again to fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons." The contrast is between fear and sonship, between bondage and freedom, between the slave's relationship to the master and the child's relationship to the Father. The word "again" (*palin*) suggests that the spirit of slavery represents the pre-conversion condition, the unregenerate person's relationship to God characterized by fear, distance, and the terrifying awareness of standing under judgment. What the Spirit has given the believer is not a continuation of that fearful distance but its radical replacement: the spirit of adoption by which the former slave cries out to the Father with the intimacy of a beloved child.

B. Abba, Father: The Cry That Cannot Be Manufactured

The pneumatological climax of Romans 8:15 is the Aramaic word "Abba", the most intimate term for father available to a first-century Jewish child, used by Jesus Himself in His Gethsemane prayer (Mark 14:36) and here attributed to the Spirit's work in the hearts of the adopted sons and daughters of God. Abba is a child's term of address to his father, not quite "Daddy" in the casual modern English sense, but neither the formal "Father" of a deferential

petition. It is the language of intimate, trusting, confident address between a child who knows his father loves him and a father who has made that love unmistakably clear.

The fact that the Spirit cries “Abba!” is pneumatologically remarkable. Paul does not say that the believer cries “Abba!” with the Spirit’s assistance. He says that the Spirit cries “Abba!”, that the Spirit is the author of the cry, the source of the intimacy, the one who produces in the believing heart the experience of being addressed by God as Father and of addressing God as Father in return. The Roman juridical adoption might change the legal standing of the adopted person without changing his inner experience of the relationship, he might know himself to be a son in law while feeling like a slave in experience. The Spirit’s adoption does not work this way: He changes not only the legal standing but the experiential reality of the relationship. He moves the adopted child from the formal knowledge that God is his Father to the intimate experience of God as his Father, from doctrine to the heart, from proposition to Abba.

Galatians 4:6 adds a Trinitarian precision to the same pneumatological claim: “Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” The sequence is important: first, God adopts (constituting the believers as sons); then, because they are sons, He sends the Spirit of His Son into their hearts to produce the experiential cry of adopted sonship. The Spirit through whom the cry comes is “the Spirit of His Son”, not an impersonal divine power but the Third Person who stands in the most intimate eternal relation to the Son, proceeding from the Father and the Son, and who therefore carries into the believer’s heart the experiential reality of what the Son knows eternally as the Father’s beloved child.

“You have received a spirit of adoption as sons” | “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” | “God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba! Father!”

Romans 8:15–16; Galatians 4:6, NASB 1995

III. The Spirit’s Witness to Our Adoption

Romans 8:16, The Co-Witness of Two Spirits

Romans 8:16 adds a pneumatological precision that is theologically rich and pastorally significant: “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” (NASB 1995). The verse distinguishes two spirits who testify together: the Spirit of God and the spirit of the believer. The Greek verb *summarturei* (testifies with, co-witnesses) indicates that both the Spirit and the believer’s own spirit are involved in the witness to adoptive status: it is not a witness delivered to an entirely passive recipient (the believer’s spirit is also a witness), nor is it a witness produced entirely by the believer’s own internal religious experience (the Spirit Himself testifies with the believer’s spirit, providing the testimony that the believer’s spirit alone cannot generate).

The theological content of the Spirit’s witness is specific: He testifies that we are children of God (*tekna Theou*, children of God). This is not merely a witness to a general sense of God’s presence or to an undefined spiritual experience; it is a witness to a specific relational reality, the believer’s status as a child of God, with all the rights, privileges, and intimacy that childhood

in God's family entails. The Spirit's testimony is the divine authentication of what the legal act of adoption has established: He brings the objective legal reality of adoption into the subjective experiential consciousness of the adopted child, so that the child knows himself to be a child not merely by doctrinal information but by the Spirit's personal witness within.

The pastoral significance of the Spirit's witness is immense for the doctrine of assurance. The certainty of the believer's adoptive status does not rest finally on the consistency of his feelings or on the quality of his spiritual experiences; it rests on the Spirit's testimony, which is the testimony of the God who cannot lie. But the Spirit's testimony is not so abstract and impersonal that it bypasses the believer's own spirit entirely; it reaches into the most intimate chamber of the believer's inner life and produces the experiential conviction of being God's child that the believer's own spirit could not produce by introspection alone. The Spirit does not merely inform; He persuades, assures, and produces the experiential reality of knowing that God is Father.

The Reformed tradition has been careful to distinguish the Spirit's witness from two errors: the mystical error of treating the Spirit's witness as an immediate, unmediated, purely subjective inner experience that bypasses the Word and the evidence of a regenerate life; and the rationalist error of treating the Spirit's witness as nothing more than a logical inference drawn from the external evidences of regeneration. The Spirit's witness works in and through both the Word and the evidence of regenerate life, but it is not reducible to either. It is a genuine, immediate, Spirit-given testimony that is experienced as such by the believer who has learned to distinguish it from the vagaries of his own emotions and the self-flattering inventions of presumption.

IV. The Privileges of Adoption

Access, Discipline, and Inheritance

A. Access to the Father in Prayer

The first and most immediately practical privilege of adoption is unrestricted access to the Father in prayer. Ephesians 2:18 establishes the Trinitarian structure of this access: "Through Him [Christ] we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father." The access is through Christ (whose blood has opened the new and living way into the presence of God, Hebrews 10:19–22), in one Spirit (whose indwelling makes the believer the Spirit's temple and whose intercession aligns the believer's prayers with the Father's will, Romans 8:26–27), and to the Father (not to an abstract divine principle or a distant cosmic authority but to the specific personal divine love that the "Abba!" cry addresses).

The child's access to the father is qualitatively different from the servant's access to the master or the subject's access to the king. The servant may petition the master for specific needs; the child may enter the father's presence with the whole of his life, with his fears and his joys, his failures and his hopes, his requests and his gratitude, in the confidence that the father's door is always open and that the father's heart is always for the child. This is the quality of access that adoption confers and that the Spirit's cry of "Abba!" expresses: the believer does not approach

God as a suppliant who must first establish his credentials; he approaches as a child who knows he is already loved, already welcomed, already received.

The Hebrews 4:16 invitation is the access privilege of adoption expressed in its most encouraging form: “Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” The “confidence” (*parrhēsia*, boldness, freedom of speech, the confidence that one has the right to speak) is the adopted child’s access privilege, the “throne of grace” is the Father’s presence approached through Christ, and the assurance of mercy and grace is the Father’s character toward His children. Adoption transforms prayer from the anxious petition of someone who is not sure he has the right to ask into the bold, confident, intimate address of a beloved child who knows that his Father has more resources of mercy than the child has capacity to request.

B. The Discipline of a Loving Father

The second privilege of adoption, and the one that most confuses Christians who have not thought carefully about what adoption means, is the discipline of the Father. Hebrews 12:5–11 argues at length that the Father’s discipline of His children is itself a proof of their adoption: “It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (vv. 7–8, NASB 1995). The absence of discipline, not its presence, is the mark of a non-son relationship. The Father disciplines His children because He loves them, because He is committed to their holiness (v. 10: “that we may share His holiness”), and because the goal of their lives is not present comfort but future glory.

The pneumatological dimension of the Father’s discipline is the Spirit’s conviction work that we examined in Lessons 11 and 13. When the Spirit convicts the believer of sin, producing the godly sorrow that leads to repentance, He is acting as the agent of the Father’s disciplinary love. The believer who understands adoption will not experience the Spirit’s conviction as the condemnation of an angry master but as the corrective love of a Father who will not allow His children to settle into patterns of sin that destroy their communion with Him and hinder their progress toward the holiness He intends. Every painful conviction, every providential trial, every spiritually uncomfortable season of the Christian life is, in this framework, an expression of the Father’s love for His adopted children, the Father’s refusal to abandon them to the sin and self-satisfaction that would make them miserable and would dishonor His name.

C. The Inheritance of Eternal Glory

The third and greatest privilege of adoption is the inheritance. Romans 8:17 completes the logic of the adoption text with the most expansive possible statement of the adopted child’s inheritance: “And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.” The inheritance of the adopted children of God is nothing less than the inheritance of God Himself, “heirs of God”, and it is shared equally with the eternal Son as “fellow heirs with Christ.” The adopted child’s inheritance is co-extensive with Christ’s inheritance, which is the fullness of the eschatological new creation, the resurrection of the body, and the eternal face-to-face fellowship with the

Father that the Son enjoys from all eternity and that the adopted children will share in the fullness of the age to come.

The inheritance is future, it is waited for, hoped for, groaned for (Romans 8:23–25), but it is secured in the present by the Spirit’s presence as the *arrabōn*, the down payment, the first installment, the guarantee of the full inheritance to come (Ephesians 1:13–14). The adopted child who groans under the weight of the present age, the suffering, the limitation, the incompleteness that characterizes life in a fallen world, groans as one who already possesses the firstfruits of the inheritance and therefore knows both what he has been given and what he is still waiting to receive in its fullness.

V. Galatians 4:4–7 and the Trinitarian Economy of Adoption

The Son Secures What the Spirit Applies

The most complete Trinitarian account of adoption in the New Testament is Galatians 4:4–7: “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” (NASB 1995). The passage is a pneumatological treasure: it traces the entire economy of adoption from the Father’s eternal purpose through the Son’s historical accomplishment to the Spirit’s personal application in the believer’s heart.

The Father sends the Son (v. 4) in the fullness of time, the pre-determined moment of redemptive history at which the conditions for the Son’s saving work have been fully prepared. The Son’s mission is specific and twinned: to redeem those who were under the law (the negative purpose, liberation from condemnation) and to accomplish adoption (the positive purpose, the granting of son-status). The Son’s obedience and atoning death, offered under the law and in fulfillment of the law, is the legal basis on which adoption is granted. The Father would not be just if He constituted former rebels as His sons without a legal basis; the Son’s redemptive work provides that basis, purchasing the full right of sonship for those who had forfeited it by their sin.

Because the adoption has been legally accomplished through the Son (v. 5), the Father sends the Spirit (v. 6), specifically identified as “the Spirit of His Son”, into the hearts of the adopted to produce the experiential realization of what the legal act has established. The Spirit does not adopt; the Father adopts through the Son. But the Spirit brings the adoption home, into the heart, into the experience, into the deepest interior of the adopted child’s soul. The cry of “Abba! Father!” that the Spirit produces is the experiential confirmation of the legal reality that the Son’s work secured.

The final verse summarizes the conclusion: “Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.” The logic is inexorable: the Spirit’s presence and the Spirit’s cry are the experiential evidence of the legal reality; the legal reality is sonship; the

consequence of sonship is heirship; and the ultimate ground of the whole is God Himself, “heir through God,” the adopted child whose inheritance rests not on any personal merit but on the grace of the God who chose, who sent, and who applied the whole economy of salvation for the sake of His own glory and His children’s eternal joy.

VI. The Eschatological Dimension of Adoption

Already Sons, Not Yet Fully Revealed

One of the most striking pneumatological features of the adoption texts is their consistent eschatological orientation: adoption is both a present reality and a future hope. The believer is already an adopted child of God, the Spirit already cries “Abba!” in his heart, the Spirit already bears witness that he is a child of God, and he already possesses the inheritance in the Spirit as its first installment. But adoption also has a future dimension that has not yet been fully realized: the full public revelation of the adopted status, the redemption of the body, and the complete participation in the inheritance of the new creation.

Romans 8:23 holds the tension with characteristic Pauline precision: “And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (NASB 1995). The verse is remarkable: Paul has just spoken of the adopted believer crying “Abba! Father!” in verses 15–16, establishing that adoption is a present reality. Now in verse 23 he says the same believers are “waiting eagerly for their adoption.” How can the believer both possess adoption already and wait for it still?

The answer is in the phrase “the redemption of our body.” The adoption that is already enjoyed in the Spirit is the adoption of the inner person, the soul that has been regenerated, converted, and brought into the family of God. But the adoption that is still awaited is the adoption of the outer person, the body, which still bears the marks of the fallen order: mortality, corruptibility, suffering, and the vestiges of sin. The full adoption will be complete only when the body is redeemed at the resurrection, when the adopted child of God appears in the full glory that his adoption entails, conformed to the image of the glorified Son (Romans 8:29), revealed as the child of God that the fallen world cannot yet fully see (Romans 8:19: “the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God”).

The Spirit who is the firstfruits of this full adoption (v. 23) is therefore simultaneously the evidence that adoption has occurred and the pledge of its completion. The “Abba!” cry of the present is the first notes of the song that will be fully heard in the new creation. The Spirit’s present witness that we are children of God is the current reality of a relationship that will be fully revealed and fully embodied at the resurrection. The adopted child groans, not in despair but in hope, because the groaning of one who possesses the firstfruits is the groaning of one who knows what the full harvest will bring and who longs for its arrival. The Spirit who produces the groan is the Spirit who guarantees that the groaning will be resolved in glory.

VII. The Pastoral Warmth of Adoption

You Are Not an Orphan in a Hostile Cosmos

The theological precision of adoption, its distinction from regeneration and justification, its legal-relational character, its Trinitarian structure, its eschatological orientation, must never be allowed to crowd out the pastoral warmth that is the doctrine's deepest gift to the Christian soul. John's exclamation in 1 John 3:1 is the pastoral heart of adoption expressed with an astonishment that two thousand years of Christian history have not been able to domesticate: "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are" (NASB 1995). "See!", the apostle cannot contain himself. The love is "how great", a translation of the Greek *potāpēn*, which carries the sense of "what incredible, unprecedented, astonishing kind of love is this?" The love is "bestowed", given as a gift, lavished upon those who had no claim on it. And the result: "we would be called children of God; and such we are." The calling is the reality; the name is the truth. We are not called children of God as a polite fiction; we are children of God in the most objective, most real, most Spirit-authenticated sense possible.

The practical pastoral application of adoption runs against some of the deepest fears of the Christian soul. The fear of not being good enough, adoption says you are not good enough, but your Father does not love you because you are good enough; He loves you because He has chosen to love you, and His love does not vary with your performance. The fear of being abandoned, adoption says you belong to a family from which you cannot be expelled, because the Son has bought your place in it with His own blood and the Spirit has confirmed your place in it with His own witness in your heart. The fear of praying into an empty sky, adoption says that the God to whom you pray is not a distant cosmic authority who may or may not attend to your petition, but your Father, who hears you because you are His child and who has made promises to His children that He cannot break without denying Himself.

The Spirit's role in making adoption a pastoral reality rather than merely a theological proposition is irreplaceable. Without the Spirit's cry of "Abba!", adoption remains a doctrine known in the mind but not felt in the soul. Without the Spirit's witness that we are children of God, the believer may assent to the proposition of adoption while living in the experiential condition of an orphan, uncertain, fearful, maintaining a careful distance from a God who may or may not be pleased with him today. The Spirit does not allow this gap to persist: He cries into the depths of the adopted soul, producing the experiential reality of the Father's love that the legal act of adoption has established. He is not satisfied with the believer knowing about the Father; He produces in the believer the experience of the Father's presence, the warmth of the Father's love, and the settled confidence of the Father's commitment that transforms the theology of adoption into the daily experiential reality of walking with God as a beloved child.

*“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us,
that we would be called children of God;
and such we are.”*

1 John 3:1, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Adoption	Greek: <i>huiiothesia</i> (son-placing). The legal-relational act of God by which those who were by nature children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3) become, by sovereign grace, children of God and heirs of the eternal inheritance secured by Christ. Adoption is distinguished from regeneration (which changes the believer's nature) and from justification (which changes the believer's legal standing from condemned to acquitted) as the act that changes the believer's relational standing from alien and enemy to child and heir. The Greek term <i>huiiothesia</i> appears five times in the Pauline letters (Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5), carrying the weight of a specific legal category in which the adopted person is incorporated into the new family with all its rights and responsibilities.
Huiiothesia	Greek: literally, "son-placing" or "placing as a son". The New Testament term for adoption (Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5). In the Greco-Roman world to which Paul writes, <i>adoptio</i> was a legal act with specific consequences: the adopted person ceased to belong to his former family and was incorporated into the new family on equal footing with biological children, becoming heir to the adopting father's estate. Paul's use of <i>huiiothesia</i> carries these legal-relational implications into the theological sphere: the adopted believer is fully incorporated into God's family with all the rights and privileges of sonship, co-heirs with Christ Himself.
Spirit of Adoption	The designation in Romans 8:15 for the Holy Spirit in His specific role of producing the adoptive relationship between the believer and God the Father: "You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" The Spirit of adoption is distinguished from "a spirit of slavery again to fear", the spirit that characterizes unregenerate existence. As the Spirit of adoption, the Third Person does not merely confer adoptive status juridically but enters the heart of the adopted child and produces the experiential reality of the Father-child relationship, causing the cry of "Abba!" that is the heartfelt, Spirit-wrought expression of intimate filial confidence.
Abba	Aramaic: Father. The most intimate term of address available to a first-century Jewish child speaking to his father, neither the formal address of a subject to a monarch nor the casual diminutive, but the confident, trusting, intimate address of a child who knows himself loved by his father. Used by Jesus in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36) and attributed in Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6 to the Spirit's cry in the heart of the adopted believer. The Spirit's production of the Abba-cry is the most vivid pneumatological expression of adoption: it demonstrates that adoption is not merely a

Term	Definition
	change of legal status but an experiential reality in which the adopted child knows and experiences God as Father in the depths of the soul.
Summarturei	Greek: to testify together with, to co-witness. The verb used in Romans 8:16 for the Spirit's witness to adoption: "The Spirit Himself testifies with (summarturei) our spirit that we are children of God." The compound prefix (sum- / syn-) indicates mutual testimony: both the Spirit of God and the believer's own spirit are witnesses to adoptive status, though in different modes. The Spirit's testimony is the primary and authoritative witness; the believer's spirit receives and joins the Spirit's testimony. The result is the believer's Spirit-authenticated inner conviction of being God's child, not a conclusion drawn from external evidence alone but a Spirit-produced experiential certainty.
Parrhēsia	Greek: boldness, freedom of speech, confident access. Used in Hebrews 4:16 ("draw near with confidence to the throne of grace") and Ephesians 3:12 ("in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him") for the adopted child's access privilege before God. Parrhēsia is the freedom of speech and confident access that belongs to those who stand in a relationship of recognized intimacy and trust, the boldness of a child before a loving father, not the fearful hesitation of a stranger before a hostile authority. The Spirit of adoption produces parrhēsia in the believer's prayer life: the boldness of one who knows he is welcomed, loved, and heard.
Spirit of His Son	The designation in Galatians 4:6 for the Holy Spirit in His role of producing the adoptive cry: "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" The identification of the Spirit as the Spirit of the Son (rather than merely the Spirit of God) connects to the doctrine of eternal procession (Lesson 5): the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and therefore carries into the believer's heart the experiential reality of the Son's own eternal relationship with the Father. The Spirit of adoption is the Spirit of the Son's sonship, He produces in the adopted believer the experiential echo of what the eternal Son knows by nature.
Potapēn	Greek: what kind, how great, of what sort. The exclamatory word used in 1 John 3:1 ("See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us") to express John's astonishment at the love that constitutes sinners as God's children. Potapēn carries the sense of "what incredible, unprecedented, astonishing kind of love is this?", the word of someone encountering something that exceeds all previous categories and demands a new vocabulary of wonder. The apostle's exclamatory potapēn is the appropriate pastoral response to the doctrine of adoption: not theological analysis but astonished worship before the love that made former enemies into beloved children.
Fully Revealed Adoption	The eschatological completion of adoption described in Romans 8:23 as "the redemption of our body." The adoption that believers currently enjoy in the

Term	Definition
	Spirit is the adoption of the inner person (the soul regenerated, converted, and brought into God's family). The adoption that is still awaited is the adoption of the outer person, the body that still bears the marks of the fallen order. The full adoption will be complete at the resurrection, when the adopted child of God appears in the glory that his adoption entails, conformed to the image of the glorified Son (Romans 8:29). The Spirit's present firstfruits are the pledge that this full adoption is coming.
Arrabōn of Adoption	The Spirit as the arrabōn (down payment, guarantee, first installment) of the full adoptive inheritance described in Ephesians 1:13–14: "sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory." The Spirit's presence as arrabōn means that the full inheritance of the adopted children of God, the new creation, the glorified body, the face-to-face fellowship with the Father, is not merely a future hope but a secured, legally guaranteed reality of which the Spirit's present indwelling is the binding divine pledge.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that adoption is not a minor benefit appended to the larger transaction of justification, nor a poetic metaphor for the general experience of God's care, but a specific, legal-relational reality that constitutes one of the most profound changes in the believer's entire existence. You are not merely forgiven; you are incorporated into the family of God as a full child and heir. You are not merely acquitted; you are welcomed. You are not merely spared judgment; you are given a Father. The movement from "I am forgiven" to "I am a child of God" is the movement from the courthouse to the family home, both are realities of grace, but the latter is warmer, more intimate, and more personally transformative than the former.

We must also believe that the Spirit's role in adoption is not merely to certify a legal fact that the believer then experiences at arm's length. The Spirit cries "Abba!" He does not merely inform. This means that the experience of knowing God as Father is not a matter of theological conviction alone but of Spirit-wrought experiential reality that the Spirit is constantly working to produce, deepen, and maintain in the believing heart. When the experience of the Father's love is dim or absent, the problem is not that the adoption has been revoked; it is that the Spirit's witness is being suppressed or muffled, often by sin (which grieves the Spirit), by neglect of the means of grace (through which the Spirit ordinarily communicates), or by the busyness that leaves no quiet space for the Spirit's intimate witness to be heard.

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

Let 1 John 3:1 do its proper work in your heart. John cannot contain himself: "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us!" The appropriate response to the doctrine of adoption is not the calm theological nod of someone who has processed a proposition; it is the astonished, moved, grateful wonder of someone who has suddenly and fully grasped what the words "I am a child of God" actually mean. Permit yourself to be astonished. The God who spoke the universe into existence from nothing, before whom the seraphim cover their faces and cry "Holy, holy, holy!", who is infinite and eternal and unchangeable in all His perfections, this God has adopted you as His child. Not as a servant in His household or a subject in His kingdom, but as a child. A beloved child whose access to Him is unrestricted, whose prayers are heard as a father hears his child, and whose inheritance is the fullness of the new creation shared with the eternal Son.

Desire the deep security of knowing that you are a child of God, not the superficial security of someone who has insulated himself from all spiritual challenge, but the deep security of someone who knows that his fundamental identity and his fundamental standing before God are not at risk. The discipline you endure is the discipline of a Father who loves you. The trials you face are the sufferings you share with Christ on the way to the glory that you will share with Christ. The Spirit who cries "Abba!" in your heart today will be the Spirit who presents you faultless before the Father's throne on the last day. You are not an orphan. Act accordingly.

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Read Romans 8:14–23 slowly and meditatively, attending to the full arc of Paul’s pneumatological-adoptive argument: the Spirit leads sons (v. 14), the Spirit produces the adopted cry rather than the fearful one (v. 15), the Spirit bears witness (v. 16), the inheritance is co-extensive with Christ’s (v. 17), the sufferings are the path to glory (vv. 18–22), and the groaning of the Spirit-indwelt believer is the groaning of one who possesses the firstfruits and awaits the harvest (v. 23). Write down the progression in your own words. What does the full arc of this passage communicate about the relationship between adoption as a present reality and adoption as a future hope?
- Examine your prayer life through the lens of adoption. The *parrhēsia* (boldness) of Hebrews 4:16 is the adopted child’s access privilege, the freedom to approach the Father with confidence. Does your prayer life reflect the confidence of an adopted child or the hesitation of a cautious stranger? Do you pray with the boldness that “Abba!” implies, or with the tentative deference of someone who is not quite sure he has the right to take up the Father’s time? Ask the Spirit to deepen your experience of adoptive access, to make the “Abba!” of your prayer not merely a theological category but the living reality of your most natural posture before God.
- Read Galatians 4:4–7 and trace the Trinitarian economy of adoption: the Father’s eternal purpose, the Son’s historical accomplishment, the Spirit’s personal application. Note that every Person of the Trinity is actively involved in your adoption: the Father predestined it (Ephesians 1:5), the Son purchased it (Galatians 4:5), and the Spirit applies it (Galatians 4:6). Write a brief prayer addressed to each Person of the Trinity in response to their specific role in your adoption, not three prayers to three gods but one prayer acknowledging the distinct and glorious role of each Person in the single act of adoptive grace.
- Reflect on the Father’s discipline through the lens of Hebrews 12:5–11. Identify a current trial, difficulty, or painful circumstance in your life. Is there any sense in which it could be understood as the Father’s disciplinary love, His refusal to allow you to settle for less than the holiness He intends? What would it mean for the quality of your response to this difficulty if you received it as the Father’s love rather than as the universe’s indifference or hostility? How does the adoption framework transform the meaning of suffering?
- Memorize 1 John 3:1–2: “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” Meditate on the present reality (“now we are children of God”) and the future hope (“we will be like Him”). Let the tension between the present and the future, the “already” and the “not yet” of adoption, produce in you the groaning and the hope of Romans 8:23.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. If you were asked to identify the single most important benefit that God has granted you in salvation, what would your first instinct be? Forgiveness? Eternal life? Heaven? Now consider: is adoption on that list? If not, why not? And after studying this lesson, where does adoption rank among the benefits of salvation in your own pneumatological and soteriological understanding? What would change in your daily spiritual life if you consistently thought of yourself first and foremost as a child of God rather than primarily as a forgiven sinner or a future heaven-dweller?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Romans 8:14–17 carefully. Verse 14 says “all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” What does “being led” (*agontai*, present passive participle) indicate about the nature and continuity of the Spirit’s leading? Does the verse say the sons lead themselves with the Spirit’s assistance, or that the Spirit leads and the sons are led? What are the practical implications of this distinction for how we think about sanctification and Christian decision-making?
3. Read Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6 together. In Romans 8:15, it is “we” who cry out “Abba! Father!”; in Galatians 4:6, it is the Spirit who cries “Abba! Father!” in our hearts. How do you reconcile these two statements? Is the Spirit crying, or are we? What does the relationship between the Spirit’s crying and our crying reveal about the way the Spirit’s sovereign work and genuine human experience operate concurrently in the Christian life?
4. Read Romans 8:16. The Spirit “testifies with (*summarturei*) our spirit” that we are children of God. Note that both the Spirit of God and the believer’s own spirit are witnesses. What role does the believer’s own spirit play in this testimony, is it passive (merely receiving the Spirit’s testimony) or active (jointly bearing witness with the Spirit)? What does the mutual character of the witness imply about how the assurance of adoption is experienced? Is it purely subjective (a feeling), purely objective (a logical inference from the Word), or something that involves both dimensions?
5. Read Galatians 4:4–7. Paul structures the passage as a temporal sequence: the fullness of time (v. 4), the Son’s redemption and our adoption (v. 5), and then “because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit” (v. 6). What is the logical significance of the word “because” (*hoti*) at the beginning of verse 6? Does the Spirit produce the adoption, or does the Father’s prior adoption produce the Spirit’s presence? What does this

sequence reveal about the relationship between the legal act of adoption and the experiential reality the Spirit produces?

6. Read 1 John 3:1–2. John’s exclamation “See how great a love” uses the word *potāpēn*, which expresses astonishment at something unprecedented and categorically surprising. What specifically does John find astonishing, is it the love itself, or the specific form the love takes (constituting sinners as children)? And note that John says “such we are”, the name “children of God” is not a poetic designation but the objective truth. What does the phrase “and such we are” add to the doctrine of adoption?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson distinguishes adoption from regeneration (a change of nature) and from justification (a change of legal standing from condemned to acquitted). But adoption also changes legal standing. What makes the legal change of adoption different from the legal change of justification? Is the distinction between these two forensic categories a distinction with a real practical difference, or is it primarily a theological classification? What does each doctrine contribute that the other does not?
8. The lesson argues that the Spirit’s cry of “Abba!” transforms adoption from a theological proposition into an experiential reality. But a persistent concern in Reformed theology is that experiential forms of assurance are unreliable, feelings and experiences fluctuate. How does the Reformed tradition hold together the Spirit’s genuine production of the experiential Abba-cry with the need for that experience to be tested against the objective Word and the evidence of a regenerate life? Is there a form of the Abba-experience that is reliable, and a form that is spurious?
9. The eschatological section (Romans 8:23) presents adoption as both present (“the Spirit testifies that we are children”) and future (“waiting eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our body”). The lesson resolves this tension by distinguishing the adoption of the inner person (present) from the adoption of the outer person (future). Is this resolution exegetically satisfying? Are there other ways to interpret the tension between Romans 8:15–16 and 8:23? And what does the present/future tension in adoption do to the believer’s eschatological orientation, does it produce groaning, hope, or both simultaneously?
10. Hebrews 12:5–11 argues that the presence of fatherly discipline is evidence of genuine sonship, while its absence suggests illegitimacy. This is a counterintuitive claim in a culture that tends to understand suffering as evidence of divine disfavor. How does the doctrine of adoption reframe the meaning of suffering and trial in the Christian life? What is the pneumatological dimension of this reframing, how does the Spirit’s witness to adoption (Romans 8:16) relate to the believer’s experience of the Father’s discipline?
11. The lesson quotes J. I. Packer’s claim (by implication from the outline’s pastoral focus) that adoption is “the highest privilege that the gospel offers.” Do you agree with this ranking? How would you compare the privilege of adoption with the privilege of

justification, or with the privilege of the Spirit's indwelling? Is there a theologically principled way to rank the benefits of salvation, or are they so mutually implicating that ranking is impossible?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson proposes examining your prayer life through the lens of adoption, specifically, whether you pray with the *parrhēsia* (boldness) of an adopted child or the hesitation of a cautious stranger. Reflect honestly: what is the characteristic emotional texture of your prayer life? Confident or cautious? Intimate or formal? Specific and expectant or vague and doubtful? What theological conviction about your status before God would most transform the character of your prayers if you fully believed it and prayed accordingly?
13. The lesson proposes reflecting on a current difficulty in your life through the lens of the Father's discipline (Hebrews 12:5–11). Identify a specific current trial. Without forcing a connection that may not be there, consider: is there any way in which this difficulty could be the Father's loving refusal to allow you to remain comfortable in a pattern of spiritual complacency, sin, or misplaced priority? How does receiving this trial as the Father's discipline rather than as cosmic indifference or divine hostility change your emotional and volitional response to it?
14. The lesson proposes the practice of a Trinitarian prayer structured around each Person's specific role in your adoption: Father (predestining), Son (purchasing), Spirit (applying). Write such a prayer and share it with the group. How does the exercise of explicitly addressing each Person in their specific adoptive role deepen your Trinitarian devotion? Does it feel natural or forced, and what does your answer reveal about the degree to which Trinitarian theology has become personally devotional rather than merely academically held?
15. The lesson closes with the pastoral application: "You are not an orphan. Act accordingly." What would it look like, specifically, to act as a child of God rather than as a spiritual orphan in each of the following areas: (a) in your private prayer life; (b) in your response to sin and failure; (c) in your relationship to other believers as co-children of the same Father; (d) in your engagement with a hostile or indifferent world? For each area, identify one concrete change that would follow from the consistent, lived conviction that you are a child of God.

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson with the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13), not as a liturgical routine but as an act of pneumatological self-awareness. Before reading it, take a moment to recognize what the Spirit is doing when you pray these words: He is producing in you the "Abba!" cry of adopted sonship. "Our Father who is in heaven", this is not a formal address to a distant cosmic authority but the adopted child's confident, Spirit-enabled address to his Father. The Spirit who bears witness that we are children of God (Romans 8:16) is the Spirit who enables the Lord's Prayer to be more than words, who makes "Abba!" the living, heartfelt, experiential cry of a soul that knows itself to be loved, known, and welcomed by the God of the universe.

After reading the Lord's Prayer together, spend time in extended prayer addressed specifically to God as Father, using the Abba-language freely, with the *parrhēsia* of Hebrews 4:16. This is the prayer time in which the theology of this lesson should become experiential reality: not a prayer about adoption but a prayer that is itself the expression of adoption. Thank the Father for the specific grace of adoption, not in the abstract but in its specific dimensions: access (the open door of His presence), discipline (His refusal to abandon you to sin and spiritual immaturity), and inheritance (the eschatological glory that awaits). Pray with the John 3:1 astonishment that John intended to produce: not "Thank You for the benefit of adoption" but "See what great love this is! That I am called Your child! And such I am!"

Invite participants to bring to God a specific trial or difficulty that they have been experiencing, and to receive it in prayer as the Father's discipline, as His love expressing itself in the refusal to leave them comfortable in spiritual mediocrity. This can be a profound and healing pneumatological exercise: the reframing of suffering from cosmic indifference or divine punishment to the specific, purposive, loving discipline of a Father who is committed to producing "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11) in His children through the painful means that their spiritual condition sometimes requires. Ask the Spirit to confirm in each person's heart that the suffering they endure is the suffering of a beloved child, not the abandonment of an orphan.

Close with a corporate reading of Romans 8:38–39 as the ultimate expression of the adoptive security that the Spirit of adoption has established: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." The love from which nothing can separate us is the Father's love for His adopted children, the love that the Spirit who cries "Abba!" witnesses to in the depths of every believing heart. Read it not as a creed to be affirmed but as a Father's promise to His children: nothing will ever take you out of this family. You are, and will remain, a child of God.

*“You have not received a spirit of slavery again to fear,
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

Key Texts: Romans 8:14–17, 23, 38–39; Galatians 4:4–7; Ephesians 1:5, 13–14; 2:18; 1 John 3:1–2; Hebrews 4:16; 12:5–11; Mark 14:36; John 16:13; Matthew 6:9–13

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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