



Texts in Context

Waiting for Adoption: Reflections on Romans 8:12-25

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At just a few days old, Hannah was found abandoned in the streets of a Bolivian city and brought to a Catholic orphanage. After many months of waiting, hoping, and praying for a child to adopt, a couple from rural Minnesota made the long trip to Bolivia and spent six weeks in that country working out the legal details of Hannah's adoption. There was much rejoicing when they were finally able to take her home and bring her to the baptismal font. There she was claimed by God and by her new family as a precious daughter.

Recently, I returned from a mission trip to Robin's Nest Children's Home in Jamaica, a haven for orphaned, abandoned, abused, or neglected children. Most of the children at Robin's Nest have at least one living parent, but their parents have been forced to relinquish custody for a variety of reasons—extreme poverty, mental illness, a track record of abuse or neglect, or simply the tender young age of the mother. A young couple from our congregation who had gone to Robin's Nest the previous year had developed a special bond with Marc, one of the infants there, and were in the process of trying to adopt him. On this second trip they had plans to meet with Marc's birth mother, who had been wavering about giving him up for adoption. By the end of the week Marc's birth mother made the difficult decision to give up her child, and a preliminary adoption agreement was signed. Yet because of the legal work still to be completed, particularly on the Jamaican side, the couple

On July 21, 2002, the second reading for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost provides the opportunity to consider our adoption by God through Christ in the context of both the poignant difficulty and wonderful grace of human adoption stories.

knows that it could be another year or more before they are finally able to take Marc home. They are still waiting, hoping, praying.

A SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

Paul writes to the church in Rome: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:15-16 NRSV).

Paul writes to a congregation living in a culture in which unwanted children were routinely abandoned or sold into slavery. In some cases, poor parents might arrange for their children to be adopted in order to give them a better chance of receiving an inheritance. Roman society placed a high value on producing offspring and heirs, and childless couples of means were often eager to adopt. Under Roman law, adopted children had the same legal status and inheritance rights as biological children.¹

In Rom 8, Paul assures his readers that although we struggle in a world of sin and death, we have not been abandoned to lives of slavery and fear. In Christ God has claimed us, adopted us as his very own children and heirs. This we know because his Spirit bears witness with our own when we cry out to God, “Abba! Father!”

Paul uses the metaphor of adoption similarly in his letter to the Galatians, where he writes:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child, then also an heir, through God. (Gal 4:4-7)

In Gal 4, the adoption metaphor serves the principal argument of Paul’s letter to this Gentile community. Here he maintains that Gentile believers, though not “natural” children of the God of Israel, have been redeemed and “adopted” through God’s Son, Jesus the Christ. Even as Gentiles they are fully and legitimately God’s children, heirs to all that God has promised.

In both Gal 3 and Rom 4, Paul supports his argument regarding the status of Gentile believers as legitimate children of God by interpreting the story of Abraham. Although there are differences between the interpretations in Gal 3 and Rom 4, both serve to demonstrate that Gentile as well as Jewish believers are Abraham’s descendants and heirs to God’s promised inheritance.

In Rom 8, then, where the adoption metaphor resurfaces, the argument concerning the legitimate status of “adopted” children of God is assumed. Here the

¹Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995) 65.

adoption metaphor supports the resounding conclusion to which this chapter builds: that even in the midst of profound suffering and struggle with the powers of sin, evil, and death, those adopted in Christ can be assured of their status and future inheritance as God's beloved children.

The place of the adoption metaphor within this argument invites further exploration.

THE GROANING OF CREATION

In Rom 8, the adoption metaphor expresses for Paul the tension of living in the now and the not yet of redemption. Those who have received the Spirit have been adopted as God's children (8:15) yet still await the completion of that adoption, "the redemption of our bodies" (8:23). Life in the meantime is characterized by struggle, groaning, and suffering as the inevitable conflict between belonging to God and being part of a creation in bondage to sin and death plays out. Paul assures his readers that suffering is not evidence of separation from God. Quite to the contrary, it is a sign of living in the "battle zone," of being indwelt by the Spirit of God which is at odds with the rule of sin and death (Rom 7:21-25; 8:1-10). It is in this very conflict between the purposes of God and the powers of sin and death that Christ Jesus suffered and died for our sake (8:2-4).

As James Dunn notes, the Spirit dwelling in us is the spirit of adoption or "sonship" (υἱοθεσία) precisely because it is "the Spirit of his Son" (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:9-10) and links believers to Jesus, making us fellow children and heirs of God. The Spirit "makes this plain by reproducing the prayer relationship of Jesus himself with God in believers: like Jesus, believers cry 'Abba! Father!' and thus attest that they are children of God and joint heirs with Christ."² Because we are joint heirs with Christ, we can expect to share in his suffering as well as his glory (8:17).

Creation, too, is caught in this conflict as it awaits its liberation from bondage to decay (8:21). Our adoption as children of God does not exempt us from the suffering of creation. To the contrary, it links us more deeply with our fellow creatures. We share in the groaning and travail of the whole created order as it longs for freedom (8:19-23). We groan (8:23: στενάζομεν) within ourselves in solidarity with the whole creation's groaning (8:22: συστενάζει). Likewise the Spirit intercedes for us with inarticulate groans (8:26: στεναγμοῖς). As Dunn writes, "Believers are being saved not *from* creation but *with* creation....Having the Spirit does not distance believers from creation but increases the solidarity of believers with creation."³ Or as Käsemann puts it, "In adoption...those who are already set in the state of sonship, and who anticipate heavenly glory therein, are also those who wait and suffer, sharing the groaning of every creature."⁴

²James Dunn, "Spirit Speech: Reflections on Romans 8:12-27," in *Romans and the People of God*, ed. Sven Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 84.

³Ibid., 88.

⁴Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 231.

Even as we “groan within ourselves,” however, the Spirit gives us hope. The Spirit is a pledge, the “first fruits” of what is to come, a sign of our redemption drawing near. The sealing of our adoption by the Spirit gives us hope to wait with patience for the completion of that adoption, “the redemption of our bodies” (8:23-25). This hope rests firmly on Jesus’ resurrection, as Paul affirms: “For if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit dwelling within you” (8:11).

This pledge is at the same time a sign of hope for all creation, for it points to Christ as the coming Lord and redeemer of the world. Our waiting for adoption corresponds to creation’s groaning in labor pains, a hopeful image anticipating that the outcome of suffering will be new life.

WAITING WITH EAGER LONGING

Rom 8:12-25 appears this year in the Revised Common Lectionary as the epistle reading for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost. Several themes touched on here lend themselves to fruitful engagement with this text in the life of a faith community. It has been moving for me to witness the anguish of couples waiting to adopt, as well as their steadfast resolve in the face of numerous disappointments and setbacks. There seems to be no limit to what they will expend of themselves and their resources in order to make a child their own. Is this not an apt metaphor for what God has done for us in Christ, expending himself in order to make us who are “orphans” in a world of sin and death his very own children and heirs? Is this not a poignant image of the God who pursues us relentlessly until our adoption is complete and will not let us go?

The adoption metaphor, furthermore, helpfully illustrates the reality of our lives as redeemed children of God. The adoption papers have been signed; we have been sealed by the Spirit at baptism. Yet we continue to experience anguish and struggle until the time when that adoption will be complete and we will be truly “home” with God. In the meantime we often groan in pain and frustration as we experience the inevitable tension between belonging to God and yet living in the world of sin and death and decay.

This message needs to be heard as a counterpoint to the “theology of glory” with which our culture is so enamored. Currently Bruce Wilkinson’s *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking through to the Blessed Life* (Multnomah, 2000) has sold millions of copies with the thesis that a particular prayer in 1 Chron 4:10 holds the key to a life of blessing and success. Variations on this theme abound in popular theology, telling us that believing or praying rightly will spare us from grief and pain and bring us health and prosperity.

Paul, however, tells a quite different story. Certainly God wills and works for our wholeness (8:28). Yet at the same time, our adoption as God’s children draws us ever more deeply into the conflict between the purposes of God and a world

bent on death and destruction. As Käsemann puts it, “Grace relates us more deeply to the earthly because it thrusts the community as a whole and each of its members beneath the cross where extreme assault and victory coincide.”⁵ Far from promising a life free of grief and pain, our adoption as God’s children means that we will share in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of God’s good purposes, for the liberation of a world in bondage. So the Spirit of Christ keeps drawing us to places of need and heartache—to places where orphaned children still wait for adoption—to bring the hope of redemption.

“For in hope we were saved,” Paul tells us (8:24). As forcefully as Paul acknowledges the suffering of this present time, he steadfastly affirms the victory over sin and death that is ours in Christ. “We hope for what we do not see” (8:25), a “hoping against hope” that makes sense only to faith (Rom 4:18). In this hope Paul assures us that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (8:18).

NEVER ABANDONED

Finally, I return to Hannah—or rather, to Hannah and her new grandfather. Just months after I baptized Hannah, I buried her grandfather. He had suffered for much of his life with various health problems, among them a rare disease of the circulatory system that had necessitated the amputation of first one leg and then the other. In the end he succumbed to an infection that his body simply could not fight off. I suspect that he knew in a way that many of us cannot quite fathom what it means for creation to be in bondage to decay, as he saw and felt the deterioration of his own body.

Just as I had read from Rom 8 at Hannah’s baptism, her family requested that I read from this same chapter at her grandfather’s funeral. In this Scripture Hannah’s family heard the promise that the one who had claimed her grandfather in baptism would see to the completion of his adoption, the redemption of his body. In this Scripture they heard the incredibly good news that as God’s beloved children, neither their loved one nor they would ever be abandoned. As Paul puts it in his resounding conclusion to Rom 8: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor power nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39). ☩

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⁵Ibid., 232.