

Introduction

Sons and Daughters of God

2013, my 39th year, was a year of extreme change. My parents, who had spent the previous twelve years in South Dakota, planned to move back east to Ohio to be near me and my family. My dad had fallen into poor health, and my mom needed help. In January of that year, I traveled out to help them pack up. It was an emotional trip. Our family had fallen in love with South Dakota, the church family there, and the beautiful scenery of the Black Hills. Over the years, I have discovered that people either love it or hate it there ... and if you are one of the ones who fall in love with the Black Hills, it is tough to let go. That was certainly the case for us. I remember helping Mom and Dad go through their things – and one day, we came across a document that held a significance far beyond its legal terminology—a faded adoption certificate. As I traced the worn edges, a flood of emotions enveloped me, transporting me back to my childhood, where I had been welcomed into the warm embrace of a family I now call my own. It was a day that signified the legal affirmation of my belonging and the unconditional love that had enveloped me from the beginning of my relationship with the man who would be my father.

This document, a piece of paper to some, symbolizes my adoption journey. It has shaped my understanding of love and family and mirrored the spiritual adoption we experience as Christians into God's diverse and everlasting family. It has taught me the true essence of grace, acceptance, and the boundless love of a family chosen not by blood but by heart.

As I sit to pen down these thoughts, it's with a deep sense of gratitude and reflection. My story is but one thread in the untold numbers of adoption narratives that span cultures, histories, and religions yet find common ground in the universal language of love. Through sharing my experience, I want to peel back the layers of what it means to be adopted—into a loving home on earth and the eternal embrace of our heavenly Father. It's a personal exploration of how being chosen and loved without precondition mirrors the most incredible story ever told in the scriptures, offering us a glimpse into the heart of God Himself—a heart that adopts, loves, and redeems.

As we study together over the coming months, I want you to discover the beautiful, complex, and redemptive adoption narrative. It's a story of finding a home, being chosen, and ultimately, belonging to a family far more significant than we could ever imagine.

Adoption is a powerful word. It describes a concept filled with love, mercy, and grace. When an adoption happens, a person is taken into a family not related to them and given all the rights and privileges of a family member. If you've experienced adoption in your physical family, you know it is just something truly incredible. I know this from personal experience. Fifty years ago, on May 5, 1974, my biological father was killed in a hunting accident directly in front of my mother. They had only been married for around 16 months. The emotional trauma of that day still affects her. I do not remember my father; I was

only a little over nine weeks old. My mother moved back in with her parents. It was a very dark time for my family. Two years later, Mom met Sam Allen, who she would later marry. Sam (dad) adopted me. Ever since I've been welcomed as if I were a flesh and blood member of the Allen family, it's been such a blessing. In 2013, as we were preparing to move my parents back east, we came across the adoption document signed by a judge in 1980. I love the language of the last paragraph of the judge's writing:

IT IS THEREFORE BY THE COURT CONSIDERED AND ORDERED, that Joseph Matthew Harvey Allen be and he is hereby permanently adopted to the Petitioners, Sam Allen and Donna Allen, his natural mother, for all intents and purposes as though he had been the natural child of both; that the Bureau of Vital Statistics of the State Health Department of Arkansas should be and hereby is authorized and directed to substitute the child's birth certificate showing the Petitioners as his parents. IT IS SO ORDERED.

I have been very blessed by the graciousness of my father, Sam Allen, who brought me into his family. I will be forever thankful for God's direction in getting him into my life. I was blessed to have him for 37 brief years of my life, as he died a few days before Christmas in 2013. His great patience with me, love, and leadership helped make me who I am today.

There are many stories of adoption in the Bible. At least three instances are occurring in the Old Testament. Moses (Exodus 2) and Esther (Esther 2) are examples. But perhaps the most compelling adoption story is seen in 2 Samuel 9 with David's adoption of Saul's grandson, Mephibosheth. Saul had been the continual enemy of David, doing everything he could to kill him. Saul's jealousy, hatred, and pride are almost unrivaled. Saul's character stands in great contrast to his son Jonathan, who was David's closest friend and confidant. At the age of five, Mephibosheth was paralyzed when his caretaker dropped him, 2 Samuel 4.4. After David came to power, what was left of Saul's family fell out of the spotlight.

David took the initiative and extended kindness to Jonathan's sons. They searched the kingdom and found Mephibosheth, who dwelled in Lo-debar, or "the barren land." There was nothing worse in society than to be crippled. Mephibosheth offered nothing to society. Even the meaning of his name ("A Shameful Thing") indicated his low place in the world. He was from the family of an enemy. When David moved to adopt Mephibosheth, it was indeed an act of grace, 2 Samuel 9.6-7. Because of David's kindness and love, which Mephibosheth did nothing to earn, he could enter the palace *as one of the king's sons*, 9.11b. In a culture that ostracized the crippled and lame, Mephibosheth ate at the king's table! It's an incredible story of grace!

Other than God's demonstration of grace and mercy to sinners, there is perhaps no better story in the Bible related to adoption than this. David's adoption of Mephibosheth is how God adopts us today. God took the initiative by sending His son and showed mercy to those unworthy, Romans 5.6. God moves to save us by His incredible love and kindness, Ephesians 2.6-7. God redeemed us when we were far beyond perfection and gave us an inheritance, 1 Peter 1.3-4. This adoption is for all who will separate themselves unto the Lord and *cleanse themselves*, 2 Corinthians 6.17-7.1.

In Romans 8, Paul moved to establish how Christians have assurance in their salvation. We stand in and

live by grace. We've been adopted into the family of God. Notice how Paul writes Romans 8.14-16, where he says all who the Spirit of God leads are **sons of God**:

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of **adoption as sons**, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are **children of God** [emphasis mine].

These terms are significant. And they should go a long way in quelling any fears we have that are related to our status as sons and daughters of God.

Consider it in terms of ancient kings "adopting" a successor or when passing the rule to his son, declaring: "This is my own son." This gives us a greater understanding of what it means to be sons and daughters of God!

The idea of adoption and sonship extends to joint rule with Christ. This is seen in Paul's thoughts in Ephesians 1.15-2.10. The *Father of Glory* raised Jesus and seated him at his right hand. We have been made alive (2.5), raised by the power that raised Jesus, and seated with Christ, 2.6. This is *the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might, that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead,...* 1.19-20. Christ is seated at the right hand of God. We are seated with Christ. We are enthroned with him. We are restored to the rule for which we were created! See Genesis 1.26, 28.

Through the lens of physical and spiritual adoption, we are reminded of the profound truth that our origins and circumstances do not determine our worth or the flaws we carry but by the love that chooses us, embraces us, and calls us by name into a new family.

The stories of Moses, Esther, Mephibosheth, and countless others throughout history who have found a home in the hearts of those not bound to them by blood mirror our spiritual adoption into God's family. This act of divine grace, where we are welcomed with open arms regardless of our past or burdens, offers an unforgettable insight into the heart of belonging, being loved, and being part of something greater than ourselves.

As we reflect on the significance of adoption, let us embrace our identity as beloved children of God and live out that reality in how we treat others. The journey of adoption, filled with its trials and triumphs, ultimately points us toward the profound truth that in God's family, there is always room for one more at the table. May we carry forward the legacy of love and acceptance we have received, creating ripples of grace that touch the lives of those around us, reminding us that we are indeed chosen, cherished, and adopted into an eternal family.