

going deeper study guide

becoming a family member



LIFE GROUPS
doing life together

“Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family...in another city.”

George Burns

“Families are messy. Immortal families are eternally messy.

Sometimes the best we can do is to remind each other that we’re related for better or for worse...and try to keep the maiming and killing to a minimum.”

Rick Riordan, *The Sea of Monsters*

“What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family.”

Mother Teresa

In Life Groups, kids, youth and adults study God’s Word together and discuss the issues and challenges of life.

More Powerful Than I Realize

These are the very words scribbled in the margin of my Bible next to Galatian 4:7, which reads: “So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.” I think both the concept of me being God’s son, and of me also being an heir, are spiritual truths that I give intellectual assent to, without either fully grasping the fullness of what those things mean – or allowing those truths to sink in to the level of impacting my day-to-day life.

I am a son of God, because He has adopted me into His family [Rom. 8:15]. Since 3 of the 5 times that the Greek word for “adoption” is used in the New Testament occur in Romans (8:15; 23; 9:4 - also Gal. 4:5 and Eph. 1:7), it is wise to see the concept through first century Roman eyes. In Roman law, adoption was a very serious undertaking. The adopted son became a member of the family, just as if he had been born of the blood of the adopter; and he was invested with all the privileges of a *filius familias*.

It must be remembered that the father in Roman law had absolute control over his family, possessing the same rights over his children as over his slaves. By this *patria potestas* the son was deprived of the right to own property, and the father could inflict any punishment he thought fit, even to the extent of the death penalty. He could also sell his son into bondage. So far as the ceremony was concerned, the difference between the transferring of a son into slavery, and his becoming a member of the family was very slight. In the one case the adopter said: ‘I claim this man as my slave’; in the other, ‘I claim this man as my son.’ The form was almost the same; it was the spirit that differed. According to the law of the XII Tables, however, a father forfeited his *potestas* if he sold his son three times. For this reason, in adoption, a legal ceremony took place in which the father went through the process of selling his son three times (buying him back himself twice); Upon the third sale the son passed over completely to the *potestas* of the adopter.

Roman history provides an outstanding example of the completeness, finality and power of the adoption in that it was the most common way of taking the Roman throne without use of force. The second emperor, Tiberius, was the adopted son of Augustus, beginning a general tradition that the Emperor adopt his successor. During the Roman Empire’s first 200 years, this tradition was common, with Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Lucius Verus all becoming Emperor through adoption. In fact, in no case amongst the Caesars did the throne pass from father to (natural-born) son.

But Paul uses still another picture of Roman adoption. He says that *God’s Spirit* witnesses with our spirit that we really are children of God. The Roman adoption ceremony was carried out in the presence of seven witnesses. Now, supposing the adopting father died, and then suppose there was some dispute about the right of the adopted son to inherit, one or more of the original seven witnesses stepped forward and swore that the adoption was genuine and true. Thus the right of the adopted person was guaranteed and he entered into his inheritance. So, Paul is saying, it is the Holy Spirit Himself who is the witness to our adoption into the family of God. Our sonship is a function of what God says about us; it is based on something objective that is outside of who we are and what we do.

And while that should have all believers feeling more secure in their salvation than ever, we find that in some aspects of Roman law, the adopted son was actually even afforded more security than any who were naturally-born. Roman law states that only natural sons could be estranged – or disowned – from a family, (as Jesus, God’s natural son, was estranged from Him). We have full assurance that our position in God’s family will never be broken for Christ has already suffered estrangement from his Father so we never may. This parallels the Roman law that only natural sons could be estranged from a family – once a child was adopted, he or she could never be disowned by their new family. Once adopted, that child instantly gained a future hope and a sense of assurance and security that non-adopted children could only dream of.

Q :: What does all of this information reveal to us about God?

Q :: What does this all reveal about ourselves?

Q :: Obviously, all of this would impact a first century Roman citizen differently than it would a modern-day American. I imagine that parents who have adopted children into their family would have some fresh insights into the heart of God regarding our adoption into His family, based on their own experiences. Are there any such parents in the group who have gone through that process that would be willing to share some of those insights?

Q :: The *patria potestas* was the father’s power over his family. In regard to his father a Roman son never came of age. No matter how old he was, he was still under the *patria potestas* – in the absolute possession, and under the absolute control – of his father. What does it mean that we are under the *patria potestas* of God?

Q :: What might be some signs that we might not be living in light of this position of being under God’s *patria potestas* – and does this idea give us any ideas for how to live differently?

Q :: As a parent of three children, I have some expectations of our children, simply because they share our last name. What are some of the expectations you might have of your children simply because of what it means to be a part of your family?

There were four primary consequences of adoption which are most significant for the picture that is in Paul’s mind. They were:

[1] The adopted person lost all rights to his old family, and gained all the rights of a fully legitimate son in his new family. In the most literal sense, and in the most legally binding way, he got a new father.

[2] It followed that he became heir to his new father’s estate. Even if other sons were born afterwards, who were real blood relations, it did not affect his rights. He was inalienably co-heir with them.

[3] In law, the old life of the adopted person was completely wiped out. For instance, legally all debts were cancelled; they were wiped out as though they had never been. The adopted person was regarded as a new person entering into a new life with which the past had nothing to do.

[4] In the eyes of the law the adopted person was literally and absolutely the son of the new father.

Q :: How do any of these four consequences relate to us in our relationship as sons and daughters, adopted into God’s family?

Q :: What is the significance of being an “heir”? What are some things – other than eternal life – which we might also “inherit”?

Q :: Like expectations and responsibilities that come with being a part of our family, what might the familial expectations and responsibilities of being in God’s family look like? How do they parallel or contrast with those we place on our own children?

Q :: How does having an accurate understanding of our true place in God’s family affect how we try to live as a Christian?