

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

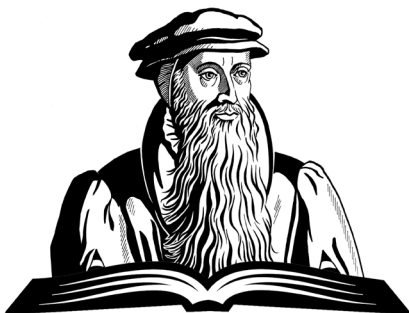
*Module 5:*

**SOTERIOLOGY—**

**THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION**

*Lecture 7*

**THE DOCTRINE OF ADOPTION**



**The John Knox Institute**  
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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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### *Module 5 ~ The Doctrine of Salvation*

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## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 7*

# The Doctrine of Adoption

Imagine a poor, poverty-stricken boy, living in a garbage dump of a major city. He has to fend for himself day by day, picking through trash to find scraps to eat, while wearing nothing but a few rags. He has no shelter, no possessions, no protection, no future, no hope. On top of that, he's forced into a slavish service of a dangerous criminal, who teaches him to lie and steal on his behalf, but who nevertheless provides him with nothing for his work. The boy knows nothing of love. Then along comes a gentleman who notices and takes interest in the boy. That interest leads to a decision to take him home and to adopt him into his own family. Legal documents are completed to secure the arrangement. Soon the boy discovers that this is no ordinary man. He is the king of the realm. And so, a magnificent carriage comes to escort the boy to his new home. He passes through the enormous gates of the king's estate, and taken into the palace, and there's marble on the floor, and statues, and gold, and all sorts of things that he's never seen before. He's escorted up into the sprawling suite that will be his bedroom. Several servants are assigned to wait upon him. And so he's bathed, and he's dressed in rich apparel, and given all of the comforts that come with that. He's then taken into the banquet hall, and he's given a seat at a table that is sprawling with scrumptious and copious amounts of food. They explain to him that he has a new name, and that he has a new status as a prince in the household. From now on, he'll have protection, he'll have provision, he'll have personal servants, and as a prince, he'll have a future inheritance that includes the best of the kingdom. But most of all, he will have the unrestrained love of the king, as his father, including limitless access to him and to his throne, and all the affection and tender care he can imagine.

Well sounds amazing. Indeed, it sounds too good to be true. But it is actually far less than God provides in the spiritual adoption of his children. His people are born into sin. They're born into the poverty of sin. They're living lives of rebellion against him. They're, in fact, children of the devil, the most evil of tyrants. And they have all of the depravations that come with that sinful status. And God comes and takes the initiative, sovereignly, by his grace, and he adopts a sinner into his family, and bestows upon them the privileges of the new status, as a member of the household and a child of the living God, gives them a new name, provides protection and provision, and indeed promises an eternal inheritance in what is to come. And above all that, the believer has limitless access to the Father, and to his throne, and all of the tender affection of a heavenly Father.

Well this introduces us, at least in a cursory way, to this doctrine of Adoption. The series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. So in this present lecture, we'll consider the

doctrine of Adoption. And we'll begin by considering, first of all, a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of this doctrine.

We read, in 1 John 3, verses 1 to 3: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure."

Notice a few things briefly about this passage. It begins with the word, "Behold." So here is the Apostle John, and he's saying, "See! Look at this!"—the language of astonishment. "Can you see the manner of love the Father has bestowed upon his believing people? If you see it, you will be amazed at how wonderful it truly is." Why? "Because we have been called," he says, "the sons of God." Here is God—he is the eternal One. He is the One dwelling in the inapproachable light of holiness. And in contrast, we are specs of dust, just creatures. No, it's far worse. We are sinful dust who have hated and rebelled, and dishonored him. It would be an astounding condescension, even for God to make us slaves. But he does far more. He adopts, and he brings believers into the immediate orbit of his own family, bestowing all the privileges of sonship upon those who are so unworthy. And so, John says, "What amazing manner of love God has shown—the love of adopting sons."

You'll also notice that the sinful world cannot see this at all. They don't know these realities. They see believers, but do not know them for what they truly are—children of the living God, and members of God's household. They don't know God himself, and therefore, they cannot truly know or understand his children. Notice that this privilege of adoption is a present reality. We are now called the sons of God. The believer is right here, and right now, a son or daughter of God. It's an accomplished fact, and an irreversible status. When the soul comes to saving faith in Christ, they are adopted at that moment, and remain sons forever. You'll also notice that their status as adopted sons is distinct from their internal character. However, as adopted sons, God carries on the work of transforming them into the family likeness. Sanctification, which we'll be considering in the next lecture, flows from adoption. The believer is made more and more into the likeness of their elder brother, Jesus Christ, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. But that work remains incomplete in this world. The best is saved for last. At the last day, the believer will be made perfect, sinlessly conformed to Christ's likeness. They shall see him, as John says, They shall see him as he is, and in seeing, shall be made like him. Knowing that this privilege awaits the adopted child of God in the future, it fuels their present pursuits of growth in grace and Christian maturity.

Well this introduces us to some of the privileges of the doctrine of Adoption. But we need to further open up the details and clarify some important distinctions. And so, in the remainder of this lecture, we'll explore what the Bible teaches us about the place of Adoption within the doctrines of Salvation.

And so, secondly, we'll consider a doctrinal exposition of Adoption. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 12, is devoted to the doctrine of Adoption. It provides a helpful overview of what the Bible teaches. And here's what it says: "All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son, Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which, they're taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have his name put on them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him, as by a father, yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises as heirs of

everlasting salvation.” Well, that provides us a helpful overview of the doctrine.

Let’s consider next the theological context. So how does Adoption fit within everything else that we’ve learned about the doctrines of Salvation. Well, we see that Adoption, like Justification, is a forensic, one-time act. So it’s not an ongoing process. It’s the saving action of becoming the sons of God. And so, it involves a change in the believer’s legal status, so that those who were by nature children of the devil, become children of the living God. Now think of how this relates to several other components. We learned about Predestination in a previous course. There, God’s sovereign and gracious election to choose a people for himself included the aim of adopting sinful slaves, and bringing them savingly into his family. Ephesians 1, verse 5, says, “Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.” We see something similar in Galatians 4:4. So Predestination included God’s loving choice to save a people—included his intention to bring them into a state of adoption.

We can also think of Adoption in relationship to Justification. Historically, some theologians included Adoption under the heading of Justification. But as we see in the Westminster Confession of Faith, it’s helpful to actually distinguish Adoption and Justification. How so? Well, Justification pertains to our being accepted as righteous, by the imputed righteousness of Christ, and thereby permits access into God’s presence. Adoption, however, pertains to our acceptance as sons, whereby we are permitted into God’s family. So they’re distinct. Justification is distinct, but it cannot be separated, of course, from Adoption. You cannot have one without the other. They come together.

Think also about the relationship of Adoption to Regeneration, which we covered in a previous lecture. In John 1, verses 12 and 13, it says, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” So Regeneration precedes Adoption. We’re brought to life, and then Adopted. So Regeneration is a prerequisite to Adoption. Regeneration involves a new birth, whereas Adoption involves becoming sons. Regeneration gives us a new nature, Adoption gives us a new name. So the new birth enables us to be possessed by God in Adoption.

And then there’s the relationship of Adoption to Sanctification, which we touched on a little earlier. Adoption is entry into God’s family. Sanctification is the process of growing to look more like a part of the family—more like our elder brother, Christ. Adoption is a one-time act, Sanctification is an ongoing process.

Well all of this helps clarify the theological context of Adoption. But next, we need to consider the privileges of Adoption. And this takes us really into the heart of the doctrine. Remember in the beginning, John says, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us.” Well, here, we peer, as it were, more closely into the wonder of the privileges of Adoption. And there are several that I’ll mention.

The first is that in Adoption, God’s name is put on us. The prophet Jeremiah, chapter 14, verse 9, says, “Yet thou, O LORD, art in the midst of us, and we are called by thy name; leave us not.” And you’ll see this language elsewhere in the Bible, the fact that we are “called by thy name”—God’s name. Even at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 3, verse 12, it speaks about how the believer in heaven is given a new name. So that’s one aspect of Adoption—God puts his name on us. Just as when a child is adopted into a human family, they are given the last name, or the name of the family. So it is with the Lord.

Next, we have access to his throne with boldness. So he is a great King, the King of kings, the God of glory, and yet, as adopted sons and daughters, we can come to that throne with boldness.

Hebrews 4, verse 16: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” Ephesians 3, verse 12, tells us something similar. So you think of a little prince in a palace. Other people, they can’t just come into the throne room and speak to the king whenever they would like, but the son of the king can. So too with the believer.

Thirdly, in Adoption, the believer is enabled to cry, “Abba, Father.” Romans 8, verse 15: “But ye have received the Spirit of Adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” Galatians 4, verse 6: “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” We’ll look in more detail at this in just a moment.

Another privilege of Adoption is that the believer is pitied, and protected, and provided for by a heavenly Father. We sing about this in Psalm 103, verses 13 and 14: “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.” You also have protection, Proverbs 14, verse 26: “In the fear of the LORD is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge.” Or you think of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6, where he’s speaking about our temporal needs, and he says you don’t need to worry about what you’re going to eat, and what you’re going to wear, and so on, you know, the Gentiles seek after those things, but your heavenly Father knows what you need, and he will provide these things, just as he does for the lily of the field, and the sparrow, and so on. Your Father will provide.

Another privilege of Adoption is that we are chastened, or disciplined by him. Hebrews 12, we read about this, in verse 5 and following: “And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.” It goes on in verse 11: “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” Well, discipline isn’t fun, but it is a privilege. And in Hebrews 12, he says there’s a difference between a son and someone who’s illegitimate. Right, you don’t discipline a child that lives down the street from you. They’re not your son or daughter, but you discipline the children in your own home. And so it is that the world doesn’t have the benefit of the Lord’s chastening, because they’re not sons and daughters of him. Whereas God loves his children so much that he’s going to train them, he’s going to chasten them, in order that they’ll be brought under that training to yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness. Discipline is a privilege.

Next, another privilege is that we’re never cast off by him—Lamentations 3, verse 31. Instead, the believer is sealed by the Lord to the last day—for example, Ephesians 4, verse 30. Another privilege is that he provides for his children an eternal inheritance. So Romans 8, verse 17: “And if children then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.” Galatians 4, verse 7, also ties Adoption to an inheritance. And you read about this inheritance in various places in the New Testament; 1 Peter 1, verse 4, it’s called “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.” Just as parents leave something for their children, they bequeath something to them when they die, our heavenly Father, who owns everything, he has promised an eternal inheritance in heaven that can’t be taken away.

And those are some of the privileges—not all of them, but some of the primary privileges of Adoption, and it shows us the wonder of it.

Next, we should consider the Spirit of Adoption. There’s two passages here that bring this out—the Spirit of Adoption. We alluded to them earlier. In Romans 8, verses 14 to 16, it says: “For

as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.” Galatians 4, verses 5 and 6 is similar: “To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son in your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” So notice, the Spirit of Adoption, there’s a few things we can learn here. First of all, this goes beyond bestowing privileges, which are objective—it goes beyond that—to the witness of the Holy Spirit to these facts. That’s something subjective. And this includes the creation of a filial trust and affection within God’s people. It also includes, however, the joint witness—the joint witness of our spirits with God’s Spirit that we are his children. God graciously stirs the heart of the believer to draw near to him, and to have confirmed that he is their Father. This is the Spirit of Adoption.

Thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically, and there’s one thing we’ll focus on here for the sake of time. And it is what is the so-called universal Fatherhood of God. So adoption obviously assumes a relationship of father to children. And it’s important for us to think through what the Bible teaches about divine Fatherhood. The Fatherhood of God includes distinct concepts. And here’s the problem—the world, and many liberal theologians, unbelieving Bible scholars will speak about how God is the Father of humanity, that we are all his children, that all people are the children of God, and so on. That’s wrong, and it’s helpful to understand why it’s wrong, and we can do that by making some distinctions. There’s really three aspects, or types of Fatherhood, if you will, divine Fatherhood.

The first is the Trinitarian Father, so the first person of the Godhead is eternally the Father. You have Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. We’ve covered this in the lectures on the doctrine of God. This is an eternal position that the first person of the Trinity alone holds, within the inter-Trinitarian relationship of the Godhead—one God subsisting in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is the eternal Father of the Son and of the Spirit. That’s Trinitarian Father, if you will.

But then secondly, we have what could be called the Creator Father. So the Scripture does refer to God as a Father in his capacity as Creator and sustainer of the world, in just a few places. And in that case, it’s speaking of him as the originator of creation. He is the Creator, who has brought all things into existence by the word of his power. He is the origin. And so in that sense, he is Father. But liberal theologians have used these brief instances, which refer to God’s relation to creation, and have twisted them and distorted them into references to the redemptive sense of Adoption. So they’ve eliminated this aspect of the doctrine of Salvation, and stretched it out to include everybody. And that destroys a Biblical truth.

Because there’s a third aspect, and it’s the one we’re dealing with in this lecture, and that is God as an adoptive Father. God makes his elect his sons and daughters through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. And this distinguished them from the rest of the world. They’re brought into his own household. This is far more intimate and far more precious than what is indicated under his work of creation generally, and his work of providence. This is a work of Salvation that belongs to God’s people.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application to ourselves, thinking about the importance of Adoption in Christian experience. A few brief things here. First of all, as we saw at the beginning, Adoption staggers the imagination, because of its amazing condescension and depth of love. Our response to this doctrine should be wonder, because this is the pinnacle of gracious privileges, and the goal of redemption, as we have seen, and we should feel something of the



amazement that comes with that.

It also has another impact upon us. The English Puritan, John Owen, wrote, “If the love of a father will not make a child delight in him, what will?” That’s a good question—a searching question. As we come under the power of this doctrine, as we meditate affectionately upon this doctrine, as we begin to explore its riches, the love of the Father is being opened up to us. And the response is that it should cause us to love him. We love him because he first loved us. It should cause us to delight in him. It should cause us to be wholeheartedly devoted to him, and to desire to glorify him with all that we have. He should be the object of all of our desires.

But it has another practical impact. In 1 Peter 5, verse 7, we’re told, “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” So when you begin to believe and see, and have confidence in the fact that God cares for you as a Father cares for his children, and far better, and far more—a heavenly Father for his adopted children, as we become persuaded in the depths of God’s tenderness, and attention, and affection, and care, it motivates us to then casting all of our cares, all of our anxieties, our concerns, our burdens, to cast those upon him. So that we come as little children with all of these struggles, and all of these worries, and all of these sorrows, and we bring them to the heavenly Father who cares, and we commit them to him. We roll them off of our shoulders, onto him. It’s a practical application of Adoption.

Another one—another practical application is a thankful responsiveness to chastening. No one likes chastening. It is painful. But when the Lord is chastening us in his Word, under preaching, chastening us in his providence, even in the case of church censure, there ought to be a thankfulness. Because, if you’re never disciplined by the Lord, Hebrews 12 tells us it’s because you’re not a son. The Lord chastens all whom he loves. And so we should be grateful that the Lord loves us enough not to allow us to stray, not to allow us to go off, but rather, to bring us back, and to train us, and tutor us, and correct us, and guide us in the ways of light, and life, and truth. We should be thankful for that. We should be responsive to that. We should come under the Lord’s chastening, and benefit, and learn from it—be trained by it.

Lastly, by way of practical application, the thought of Adoption fuels our worship, and prayers, and our whole outlook on life. What can trouble us? What can assail us, if I am a child of the great King? If I belong within the palace of the King? What is it?—he protects us, he provides for us, he is the One who shows affection for us. Well, this fuels our worship. It strengthens our whole outlook on life about even the things that are difficult around us. The wonder and glory of the doctrine of Adoption.

Well, in this lecture, we’ve considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about Adoption. We’ve noted that Adoption conveys staggering privileges to those who receive salvation and become the children of the living God. The question remains: How do these children grow up into spiritual maturity? Well, in the next lecture, we’ll consider, with the Lord’s help, the answer to that question, in the doctrine of Sanctification.