

Astonished Children of our Adopting God

1 John 2:28–3:3

April 6 & 7, 2013
Steve DeWitt

Our text today is 1 John 2:28-3:3. As you turn there, I have looked forward to speaking on this text. It is my suspicion that what this text talks about is the biggest blind spot in view of God and my relationship with him. I suspect the same is true for others here today. I'm not sure why. It may be the most wonderful part of being a Christian and yet the reality of it seems to get muddled in with all kinds of other descriptors.

What would you say is the most wonderful part of being a Christian? Your answer somewhat depends on who you were discipled by or where you were discipled. The Reformers and Lutherans would say justification. The Charismatics and Pentecostals would say the experience of the Spirit. The Old School Methodists and Baptists would say gospel and evangelism. When people visit our church, often their first question reveals what they think is most important. What is your position on eschatology? Eternal security? Inspiration? Church government? etc. Rarely, if ever, will I get asked about today's subject. Yet, it may be the most powerful and wonderful part of the whole Christian experience both now and in eternity. One of our favorite theologians says you cannot truly understand Christianity without understanding it (J.I. Packer).

So that's why it's exciting today. I feel the opportunity to enrich every Christian's joy in God and I hope, make becoming a Christian even more desirable for anyone who has not yet become one. What is the subject? Astonished Children of our Adopting God.

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1 John 2:28-3:3 ESV)

This will be our text for two sermons as there are two main themes grouped broadly under who we are and who we will be. Who we are is children of God and who we will be is what happens to us when Jesus returns. We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. So this passage has fantastic truths and they interweave. We will untangle these two main threads so we can see and understand them clearly.

John carries the theme of verses 18 and following, abide in him. "Abide" means to stay and in light of the false teachers who ravaged this church, John urges this local church to doctrinally stay, abide.

John begins Chapter 3 with a verse that many of us know, perhaps from the song with lyrics from this verse. The King James says it this way, Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons of God. The NIV gets at it with, How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. These translations are trying to capture what the Greek makes clear—John is rejoicing as he writes this. The first word, see in the ESV, is imperative. It has an exclamation point. Look!

Behold! It is a word of astonishment and wonder. Oh wow! What love of the Father! I want you to feel the emotion of it because what John is describing is something emotion worthy. He's describing the kind of love the Father has given us.

Lavished on us. Bestowed on us. This word translated "given" in the ESV has a helpful nuance; a gift from a foreign place. I remember as a boy, my dad worked for John Deere and would travel occasionally for work to Europe. We were always excited because he would bring home gifts for us kids, things different than found around here. Authentic German chocolate. A toy double-decker red bus from London. They held a certain fascination because they were from a foreign place.

That is the sense of John's amazement at the love God has given to us. It's so out of the ordinary. So foreign to what is normal to us. It's a different kind of love than we humans give to one another. What is it that makes John gush in amazement? What kind of love has God lavished on us? It's the rest of the sentence, that we should be called sons of God.

There is a kind of love that is foreign to us, yet God lavishes it on us. How? How does God give us this love? He calls us his children. In short, he adopts us; adopts us as his own sons and daughters. Divine adoption. Most of us are familiar with adoption and we have many families who have or are currently in the process of adopting, which is a great thing. We have many others serving as safe families and foster care. Former pastor Chris Carr and his wife Eva recently adopted two children from China and many of us are following their story. It's really exciting to see it and I think there is something powerfully moving when a family welcomes a child in and loves that child as their own. I have family members who are adopted and to see my family absolutely love those children is a joy. It's powerful and wonderful to see and we certainly want to promote adoption and the free giving of love to God's image everywhere it's found.

The power in human adoption is that it is a small reflection of God's adopting love of us. Yet I don't find adoption high on the theological radar. One reason adoption is not high on many Christians' radar is that it gets jumbled in with other big theological words. We are justified. Sanctified. Regenerated. Adopted. Adopted gets lost in the shuffle and that is a great tragedy. Let's sort this out.

Justification: God changes our legal standing before his law → Forgiven

Regeneration: God changes our spiritual nature from deadness to life eternal → Alive

Adoption: God changes our relational status from enemy to sons of God → Father/Family

Each of these is wonderful and God's sovereign grace to us. Justification is the basis by which we can have a relationship with a holy God. Regeneration must happen, as Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3; we must be born again. Our spiritual natures have to be made alive again for us to fellowship with a spiritual God.

But friends, realize that God could have stopped there and we still would gather for Christmas and celebrate the incarnate Christ and we still would have Easter celebrations of Jesus' cross and resurrection. These acts of God on our behalf would be sufficient to save us from wrath and to give us eternal life. And these would illicit powerful feelings like "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found was blind but now I see." There is more than enough in what God did through Christ and the gospel in us for us to be overwhelmed by his grace to us. That would be far more than we deserved and there wouldn't be a moment in heaven we would fail to worship God for his incredible grace and love. There's already lots of love in the story. Already more love than we can begin to comprehend.

And I suppose, if God's grace simply declared us righteous and changed our nature and gave us eternal life, we would be like the angels for eternity. That doesn't sound so bad, does it? Serve God. Live forever in a beautiful place with other angels. That's a major upgrade from what our sins deserve. Better an angel in heaven than a sinner in hell, that's for sure.

But this is where God's love is so over the top that it defies comprehension. God does something that our salvation from sin didn't require. We're saved without adoption. We're in heaven without adoption. We are righteous and holy without adoption.

But God, to show the wonder of the fullness of his love, takes it to a whole other level. He not only forgives the sinner, but changes the relationship status from enemy combatant of God to adopted full child of God. This status change forever changes how we relate to God in a way that the angels have and will never enjoy. They are God's servants. We are God's children. God is their God and king and master. He is all of that to us but the defining relationship we have with God Almighty is that He is our father. God is Dad. That's a breathtaking and awe-producing status change for us and an extravagant, foreign, unspeakable love from God.

Justification means our acceptance with God as righteous and the bestowal of the title to everlasting life. Regeneration is the renewing of our hearts after the image of God. But these blessings in themselves, however precious they are, do not indicate what is conferred by the act of adoption. By adoption, the redeemed become sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty; they are introduced into and given the privileges of God's family. (John Murray, quoted in Foundations of the Christian Faith, James Montgomery Boice, p. 442.)

Here is how John writes of it in his gospel:

- But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)
- Paul writes, But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)
- 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!" (Romans 8:15)

This last verse holds a special truth. God wants his children to know they are his and sends his Spirit to us to assure us of our status. By the assurance of the Holy Spirit, we speak to God as Father or, notice the word, Abba.

My dad would never let us call him father. He would say, I'm Dad. I think part of this might have been that he was only four years old when his dad died. So my dad grew up in a single mother home and never really knew his dad or what having a dad was like. I think this made being a dad extra special to him.

Paul says we can address God as our Abba. What is that about? The ancient documents tell us that Abba was how small children addressed their fathers. The Talmud says that children called their mothers Imma and their dads Abba. It's not that different than English. Moms always want their kids' first word to be, Mama. Say Mama. Come on, say Mama. But

inevitably what ends up coming out first? Dada. Dada is the English translation of Abba. Child-talk for Daddy.

Do you see friends? Here is the love of God. He doesn't want us to fear him as Judge or view him as a distant Father, simply the spiritual progenitor of faith. What word is more intimate, more simple and touching than Dada?

When combined with John 1:12, but to all who did receive him and Galatians 4:5, so that we might receive [him], the picture is complete. Our adoption has nothing to do with earning it. This is not performance based love or God would never adopt any of us; we are sinners! The reality is that our spiritual adoption by God Almighty is, like salvation, simply received.

This is true in human adoption. Nobody is forced to adopt a child. They do so willingly. And the child can't require it or demand it, they receive it. In the case of an infant, they have no idea of how their lives and destinies are changed by this.

Russell Moore writes about his adoption of two Russian children; how he and his wife went to the Russian orphanage. The conditions were beyond terrible. The condition of their soon to be children was horrific. They worked through the long and grueling process and finally the day came when they took those children out of that orphanage and got on a plane and brought them into their new home with their new status. Were those children part of the negotiations? Did they pay for the adoption out of their own pockets? What exactly did they do to earn this new place and new status and new privilege? They did nothing. It was completely a love gift. They received it.

Our spiritual adoption is the same. We were in the spiritual orphanage. Actually, it was more like a spiritual prison than an orphanage. We were without resource or any way to improve our lot, change our status, and get out of there. The conditions were deplorable, even though we didn't realize it because it was all that we had ever known. We were born there.

Then one day, the door of that spiritual orphanage opened and light shone through. Someone was there to get us out. Someone seemed to care. The light through that door was blinding but we discern that our adopting parent is none other than God himself. Who pays the price to set us free with the ransom value of Jesus' death? That spiritual equity frees us from the orphanage. Out we go from that deplorable place. But God doesn't stop there. O little orphan, so helpless and so lost. Not only am I paying the price to set you free, I have decided to bring you into my home and I am declaring that from this day forward, you shall be a part of my family. Not just a house guest or a guest at my table. From now on, you are my son and I would like you to see me and speak to me as your Father. In fact, call me "Dada." I love you.

What must the spiritual orphan think? I was just rotting in the orphanage. Stuck there with all the others. Hopeless. Loveless. Longing for someone to love me. And then, God, you came along and you set me free. And now you are going to bring me into your home? You are going to wash me and care for me? Clothe me? Feed me? And on top of all that, you are going to make me your son and give me a place at your table forever? Why? Who are you? Who does this?

The only answer is a loving God. A love found nowhere else but in God. This leaves us astonished orphans, completely astonished to discover that we are sons and daughters of

the Most High God. Behold what manner of love the Father has lavished upon us that we would be called children of God.

It staggers the mind, doesn't it? John was astonished, are you? If you have not received this gift by faith in Jesus, doesn't this up the ante and I hope, draw you to become a Christian? To become a child of God?

To Make it Clear, Here is What Adoption Means...

God loves us (1 John 3:1)

This is what John gushes over. What love! That we would be called children of God! God relates to us as his children with a fatherly love. Jesus speaks of this in his sermon on the mount and tells us if our earthly fathers knew how to do good for us, how much more our heavenly Father?

I think it would dramatically improve our perspective on God and faith if we saw God according to his fatherliness, and we as the objects of that fatherly love. If he loved us when we were in the orphanage, how much more will he love us now that we are in his family?

He loves you. Christian. The Almighty God chooses to call you his child and to relate to you with that tender, fatherly love. Amazing.

God is not our judge, but our heavenly Father (Matthew 6:9)

Jesus encouraged us when we pray to pray, Our father in heaven. I think we can pray to "God" and even to other members of the Trinity. But Jesus didn't give that model, the model is praying to the Father. Just acknowledging his fatherliness says a lot about how I view myself. If God is my Father, then I am his child.

God disciplines us for our good (Hebrews 12:7ff.)

Having a dad is great until discipline time. How many of us know the dreaded feeling when Mom would say, Wait till your Father gets home. Why? Discipline was coming. Now I look at it and I'm glad my parents did.

God disciplines us for our good. If you are experiencing his loving discipline, submit to it. He only means good by it. Embrace whatever your heavenly Father is teaching you.

We are entitled to an inheritance as children of God (Ephesians 3:6)

Mark my words. Someday you are going to come up to me in heaven and say, I had no clue, not a clue, what it meant to be a child of God! Incredible privilege! An inheritance.

We are all in the family of God together (Hebrews 2:11)

If God is your Father, then you are a brother or a sister. The basis of our Christian relationships is our mutual adoption by the same heavenly Father. Being in God's family means we have filial responsibilities to one another, primarily to love but also to serve, pray for, encourage, admonish, and many others. It is a privilege to be in this family. Every brother and sister is someone God loves, shouldn't I as well?

Astonished children of our adopting God. May all the children of God be astonished and all the remaining orphans receive this offer by faith. How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3: 1 NIV 1984)

Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

Additional Scripture quotations taken from Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

© 2013 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.