The Fatherhood Of God (4)

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0:00] Please turn with me in your Bibles this evening to John chapter 1, verse 12, 13. 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, not of the will of the flesh, not of the will of a man, but of God.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
If you read Evan in the company of John Stotter, heard him preaching, that was always the prayer that he prayed just before the sermon, and that's why I prayed as well. We all have our favorite verses in the Bible. What's your favorite verse in the Bible?
We all have our favorite verses, verses which are both precious and important. In my opinion, these verses, John chapter 1, verses 12 and 13, are the most important verses in the Bible.
They are world-changing. They are life-changing. They are destiny-changing. They refer to matters which, if it were not written down in black and white, we would never dream of speaking of.
[1:32] They speak of a privilege so high and profound, it would never seem possible that a mere human being could attain to such things. I'm referring to the possibility of us becoming children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, children of God.

There is no greater Christian doctrine, no greater achievement of Christ on the cross, no greater Christian privilege than that of divine adoption.
It is what we were created for. But in a more sublime and altogether higher way, it is what Christ died to give us.
By faith in Him, we have the right to become children of God. Just as surely as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, so we, creatures of the dust, have the right to be children of God.
The great English theologian J.I. Packer, in his masterful book, Knowing God, says of adoption, It is the highest privilege that the gospel offers, higher even than justification.
[2:51] It is the highest privilege the gospel offers, higher even than justification. We have been studying the Bible's presentation of the fatherhood of God, but if in the course of time you happen to have forgot everything I've said up to this point, and if you happen to forget everything I say afterwards, remember the gist of tonight's study from this most important of texts.

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, not of the will of the flesh, not of the will of a man, but of God.
Let's consider this teaching under three headings. New status, children of God. New birth, born of God.
And new faith, those who believed in His name. Let me repeat Packer's quote, because this is why tonight's study is so very important for our Christian minds and Christian hearts.
Adoption is the highest privilege the gospel offers. First of all then, new status.
[4:10] New status. Of all the gospel writers, it is John who refers most to the fatherhood of God. Now given that John was Jesus' closest friend, he who's often referred to as the one whom Jesus loved, this is an important fact.

Of all the disciples, he spent most time with Jesus, and therefore he knew what was of most importance to Jesus. So clearly God being our father, and we being His children, was of prime importance to our Lord, and therefore it should be to us.
Likewise, remember that John wrote this gospel in the mid-90s AD, some 30 years after the other writers wrote their gospels. In other words, John's had a lot more time to reflect on what Jesus said than the others did.
And in John's mind, the highest privilege we have access to as those who have faith in Jesus Christ is that we have the right to become children of God.

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Now we must be careful to read John's gospel according to the national and cultural context in which it was written, and not ours.
[5:28] That will help us to understand what John means when he talks about us becoming the children of God. So in the first instance, John is writing his gospel out of a Jewish context.

The Jewish nation viewed themselves as the children of God. God had chosen them out of all the nations of the world to be his. As such, they enjoyed special privileges.
God had saved them from their slavery in Egypt. God had given them his divine law and had promised them his divine protection. God had blessed them with their own land.
In John 11, verse 52, Caiaphas, the high priest, uses the language of the children of God to describe the Jewish nation and its descendants.
So for John, writing from a Jewish context, to become a child of God is to enjoy the special privileges hitherto reserved for the nation of Israel.
[6:29] They were deeply loved by God, had been blessed beyond all the other nations on the earth. They had his special presence with them in the temple in Jerusalem. They held dear the promise of a coming Messiah.

God calls them the apple of my eye, my treasured possession, and to them he promised his eternal comforts. And John's telling us that through faith in Jesus Christ, all these privileges are ours.
We're not ethnic Jews, any of us here, but what was once promised to them is now fulfilled in us. So when we read the Old Testament and we come across all these glorious promises God made to the nation of Israel, if you're a child of God, these are your promises also.
We take them and we believe them. We place our weight upon them and we let them be our guide and our comfort in life. He's writing out of a Jewish context.
But in the second instance, John's also writing out of a Roman context. A Roman context. I believe that Roman law is still taught in first year to our law students in universities and rightly so because Roman law is the basis for so many of our legal institutions today.
[7:54] In the Roman world of John's day, adoption was an incredibly powerful legal action. A Roman citizen could choose to adopt someone to be their son or their daughter.

And as such, that person, whoever it was, became a legal child with all the privileges of status, lifestyle, and inheritance. Bear in mind that almost a third of all the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were slaves.
They had no status at all and as such, they were the properties of their owners. They were not family. They had no other status than that of slave. By contrast, the person who had been adopted as a Roman citizen enjoyed all the privileges and all the protections Roman society could provide. They became heirs of their adoptive fathers' titles, estates, and possessions. Writing out of that context, John's telling us that through faith in Jesus Christ, we have the legal right to be the adopted children of God.
Some of John's readers would have been slaves with no rights under Roman law. But by faith in Jesus Christ, they became children of God with greater privileges than anything that could be imagined in the Roman world.
[9:25] Their status was elevated beyond that of any Roman senator. Their inheritance was vast given that their heavenly father owned the cattle on a thousand hills to whom the nations are but grains of sand on the scales.

although we today are far removed from the Roman world, although not as far as we think perhaps, John's telling us that by faith in Christ, we have been legally adopted as sons and daughters of God and as such are His heirs.
We enjoy all of God's protections, all of God's privileges. It may not appear this way to any of us, but if you're a believer here this evening, you are rich beyond your wildest imaginings.
For we possess the same privileges as God's natural son, Jesus Christ, we may say. We are core heirs with Him of God's glory.
So bear in mind these two contexts out of which John is writing. The Jewish world, the Roman world.
[10:40] They have slightly different emphasis, but the message is basically the same. As the children of God, we are privileged beyond our present understanding, for we have Him as our Father and we are His children.

I wonder whether you ever stop and look at a glorious sunset.

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Perhaps you're on holiday and as you drive over the brow of a hill, the sun's setting and the dying light sheds its intense rays over a magnificently colored landscape. You stop the car and you open the window and you gaze in wonder.
You're not really thinking anything other than, wow. Because you're captured by the beauty of all you can see.
And John's telling us, wind down the window. Stop. Gaze at the beauty of your adoption as sons and daughters of God.
[11:51] Stop all you're doing and let your mind and heart gaze at this most magnificent of gospel truths. You, whoever you are, by faith in Jesus Christ, are God's child.

No matter how little we think of ourselves, we are children of God. No matter how little the world thinks of us, we are children of God.
God, what matter this world's opinion, what matter our opinion in light of this stunning truth, we are children of God with all the privileges and blessings of divine sonship.
If all this study achieves is that in the madness of 21st century busyness, we stop for a while, wind down the window, and gaze at this magnificent new status of ours.
It will have achieved its purpose. New status. Second, new birth. New birth.
[12:56] John tells us how this adoption comes about. It is by new birth. We are born not of blood, verse 13, not of the will of the flesh, not of the will of man, but of God.

Now, this flies in the face of what it means to be a child of God in the Old Testament. Becoming one of the children of God in the Old Testament was simply a matter of being born into a Jewish family. Being born of blood, of the will of the flesh, of the will of a man, constituted your inclusion in the family of God, and conferred upon you all the privileges of divine sonship.
And by contrast, John's telling us that the means by which our adoption comes about is not this way. It is not by natural generation.
It is by new birth and that birth from God. It is not natural. No one is born into the family of God. Rather, as we'll see in a moment, they are born anew through faith in Jesus Christ.
[14:03] Christ. This is vitally important for all of us to know and understand, every one of us, so listen up. No one is a Christian merely because they were born into a Christian family.

No one is a Christian merely because they have Christian parents. No one is a Christian merely because they were born in a Christian nation. No one is a Christian merely because they have Christian brothers or sisters.
brothers. Please remember that because it's a misconception. But just because someone's been born in a Christian country, we're automatically Christians.
Or that just because someone comes from a Christian family, that they're automatically Christians. What's required isn't natural birth. What's required is new birth.
This, of course, was the question which flummoxed Nicodemus, the religious teacher, when he said to Jesus, how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born again?
[15:07] If a man or a woman is to be born, is to become a child of God, rather, it is not by process of natural child-baiting. Rather, he or she is born of God.

In fact, there is no other way for us to become a child of God than that we are born of Him through faith in Christ. And again, we'll explore that in our last point.
The theological term for this is regeneration, which literally means born again. Now, the term born again Christian has become synonymous with fundamentalism and American republicanism.
This is unfortunate because, according to John, the truth is that a born-again Christian is the only kind of Christian there is. There is no other kind of Christian.
There is no other kind than he or she who has been born of God. I'm not sure, due to these regrettable illusions, whether we can call ourselves or should call ourselves born-again Christians anymore.
[16:17] and yet, really, that's what we preach because that's what Jesus taught. Unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And my question to us all is this, have you been born of God?

I'm not asking whether you were born in a Christian nation. I'm not asking whether your mom and dad are Christians. I'm asking whether you yourself have been born again of God.

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For it's through this means, and this means alone, you can become a child of God with all the privileges that new status entails. You'll notice that John is at pains to extend the measure of God's family far beyond the borders of the nations of Israel.
The offer to become a child of God through faith in Christ isn't limited to those of Jewish ethnicity, but for anyone who will believe in Christ.
It is for Jew, it's for Gentile. The qualifying basis for one's new birth is not natural birth. It is spiritual birth through faith in Jesus Christ.
[17:34] Now, as I've said earlier, John was writing this gospel very late in the first century AD. At that time in the church, Gentile Christians vastly outnumbered Jewish Christians, but all of them, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, Roman or otherwise, was an adopted child of God through faith and new birth.

What a privilege and an occasion for us to stop and wonder again at the truth that I, a Northern European from Scotland, should, by the grace of God and faith in Christ, by virtue of the new birth, become a child of God.
and that any one of us of a different ethnicity or of a different country, should, by the grace of God and faith in Christ, by virtue of the new birth, become a fellow child of God.
Third and lastly, we have had new status, new birth, and then third and lastly, new faith, new faith. The final issue with which we must deal is that means by which we qualify for adoption as God's children.
How is it God gives us new birth? This is another one of those issues which makes this verse stand out as being of primary importance in the Bible.
[19:20] In the Jewish world of the day, to be a child of God required you to be born into a Jewish family, to be genetically descended from Abraham, the father of the Jews, and be circumcised.

In the Roman world, to become an adopted child required a piece of parchment containing details of the legal transaction which had taken place together with any money or property which had changed hands to ease that process of adoption.
So it's either by genetic descent or by legal document. But entry into the family of God is far more basic than either Jewish or Roman method.
Listen again to John's words. But to all who did receive him, entry into the family of God through new birth is achieved by what John calls receiving Christ.
Christ. The hymn to whom John is referring is Jesus Christ who, according to the earlier portions of this chapter, is called The Word Who is God.
[20:28] Through Him all things were made. Him who is the life and light of all humanity. Here there's no legal parchment. There is no certificate of genetic descent.

There is simply receiving Christ. That's the means by which we become children of God with all the incalculable privileges contained within that status.
But you may ask, what does it mean to receive Christ? John continues by way of explanation to all who did receive him, namely to those who believed in his name.
Receiving Christ equals believing in Christ. These two terms stand together. Receiving and believing. What does it mean to receive Christ?
It means to believe in his name. Faith, not formula, that's the means by which we entered into the family of God and become his sons and daughters.
[21:32] Blessed with all the wealth of his glorious inheritance. I love the way in which the Alecant bishop, J.C. Ryle, describes this. He writes, to receive Christ is to accept him with a willing heart and to take him as our savior.

To receive Christ is to accept him with a willing heart and take him as our savior. Even as we accept Christ with a willing heart and we take him as our savior, we are born again of God and we become his children.
You see how basic entry into the family of God really is? It's not a legal document, it's no genetic descent, it's through faith in Christ, the Christ who is God, the Christ through whom all things were made, the Christ who is the life and light of all humanity.
It is faith in the person of Christ, the Christ who became flesh and dwelt among us, the Christ who died on the cross and rose on the third day, the Christ who is ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father on high.

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this is the new faith we are required to have if we are to become children of God. It is not a matter of genetic ancestry, it is not a matter of Roman legal transaction, it is accepting Christ with a willing heart and taking him as our savior.
[23:09] That's the basis upon which Gentiles flooded into the early church. Not because they had some genetic connection to Abraham because they didn't. not because they had been granted a new status under Roman law because they hadn't.

But because it was through faith they became the children of God. So let's recap this point before we conclude because for some, faith in the Christian life isn't the easiest of concepts but the hardest.
What does it mean to have faith in Christ? Christ? If we accept J.C. Royal's definition then faith in Christ means two things. It means to accept him with a willing heart first of all.
Do you want Christ? Do you want to believe in Christ? Are you willing to receive Christ? Then you're a good part of the way there to having genuine Christian faith.
That you want Christ and what he has to offer. Second, it's to take him as your savior. It is to recognize that without him we're lost, that with him we're saved, that Jesus Christ is our only hope for eternal salvation.
[24:33] Just as a bride and groom at their marriage ceremony say to each other, I take you to be my, that they make a loving promise to love their spouse for the rest of their lives and to be committed to them.

So faith takes Christ as our savior and promises to love him and be committed to him for life. You say, I can't take Christ because I know I won't love him perfectly.
We don't love our spouses perfectly, any of us. And we will not love Christ perfectly. But nevertheless, we make that promise to love them with all sincerity and determination when we make it.
And that is faith. It's no more than that. It's no less than that. Accepting Christ with a willing heart and taking him as savior. The highest benefit of faith in Christ is that in so believing, God gives us new birth in him, into his family, and we become his infinitely privileged children.
who then among us is unwilling to accept Christ and to take him as their savior? If yet you haven't taken that step, let me invite you on the strength of the promise here in John chapter 1 verse 12 and John chapter 1 verse 13 to make that commitment right now.
[26:04] that in the quietness of your heart, you say to God with no one else listening, I willingly accept you, Christ, and I take you to be my savior.

I willingly accept you, Christ. I take you to be my savior. And if you want to talk about this, please talk to me after the service tonight.
I'll be staying around for tea and coffee. You can grab me and I'll gladly talk to you about it. This sermon is all together without application and rightly so because what I really want for all of us is that vision of the person standing, gazing, open mouthed in wonder at a dying sunset.
There's the ultimate application because on the basis of this most important text in the Bible, I can confidently tell you that if you believe in Jesus Christ as your savior, despite what the world says and despite what you say to yourself, you have been born again into his divine family and you, my fellow Christian, are blessed beyond your wildest dreams with Christ's inheritance in glory.

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