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*Jesus in the Synagogue*, painting by Greg K. Olsen

Jesus has power to redeem us, and all who are redeemed are called His sons and daughters.

# Adoption and Atonement: Becoming Sons and Daughters of Christ

*Brian K. Ray*

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As my wife and I walked out of a Russian courtroom one December morning, our hearts were filled to overflowing. The judge had just finalized the adoption of our two baby boys, and we headed out into the winter cold to pick them up from the orphanages where they were located. The diligent prayers and the tireless efforts of many months had finally come to fruition. We thanked our Heavenly Father that the miracle of adoption had been realized in our lives, that by that process these two beautiful baby boys were now legally ours, and that shortly thereafter, through the authority of the sealing keys of the priesthood, they would be ours forever in righteousness. That experience has caused us to reflect much on the process of adoption whereby we can be adopted into the family of Jesus Christ, becoming His sons and daughters and qualifying for eternal life.

## **The Atonement and Adoption**

Jesus Christ was foreordained in premortal life to fulfill the role of Redeemer and Savior in our Father's plan of happiness. He achieved Godhood there (see John 1:1; Hebrews 1:8-9). The scriptures describe His foreordination in terms of being prepared (see Mosiah 4:6-7; 18:13; Moses 5:57). Jesus was prepared so that He might be able to work out the infinite Atonement for all mankind, and certainly He was successful in doing so. Elder Neal A. Maxwell confirms the reality of the Atonement and testifies of the inevitable success of God's plans: "Because the centerpiece of the Atonement is already in place,

we know that everything else in God's plan will likewise finally succeed. God is surely able to do His own work! (See 2 Nephi 27:20–21.) In His plans for the human family, long ago God made ample provision for all mortal mistakes. His purposes will all triumph and without abrogating man's moral agency."<sup>1</sup>

Having accomplished the Atonement, the Lord Jesus Christ had the title of Father, specifically the "Father of our salvation," bestowed upon Him by God the Father. In a doctrinal exposition by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, as referenced by Elder James E. Talmage in *Articles of Faith*, the Brethren explained that in this sense, the title of Father "has reference to the relationship between Him and those who accept His Gospel and thereby become heirs of eternal life" and "that by obedience to the Gospel men may become sons of God, both as sons of Jesus Christ, and, through Him, as sons of His Father."<sup>2</sup>

To the brother of Jared, Jesus explained how He is both the Father and the Son, as follows: "Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters" (Ether 3:14). By virtue of His Atonement, the Savior has the power and the authority to redeem mankind, and those who are redeemed are referred to as His sons and daughters. We are adopted into His family and become His.

The Apostle Paul understood the doctrine of divine adoption (see Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:5). Paul taught the Galatian Saints:

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,

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 into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. (Galatians 4:3–7)

Understanding the term *adoption* helps in our comprehending, at least in some small way, the Atonement of Christ and His attendant grace and mercy. Adoption means literally to “choose for oneself.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus Christ chooses for Himself those who will be adopted by Him and become joint-heirs with Him. Although His love for all mankind is limitless, not all will choose to satisfy the requirements for divine adoption; an inheritance in the kingdom of heaven is conditional on spiritual prerequisites. This point of doctrine was made clear to the Prophet Joseph Smith when the Lord explained to him that because of personal unworthiness, “many are called, but few are chosen” (D&C 121:40; see also vv. 34–46).

Abinadi also understood this doctrine and strove to teach it to King Noah and his high priests. Subsequent to quoting Isaiah’s masterful discourse on the Savior’s Atonement, Abinadi explained the Lord’s roles as Father and Son: “I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son—The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son” (Mosiah 15:1–3).

Abinadi then pointed out Isaiah’s prophecy that “when [Jesus’s] soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed,” which he followed with a probing question: “And who shall be his seed?” (Mosiah 15:10). In other words, whom will the Savior adopt—who will become His spiritual sons and daughters through the power of His atonement? Abinadi outlines the requirements:

Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has *heard the words of the prophets*, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord—I say unto you, that all those who have *bearkened* unto their words, and *believed* that the Lord would redeem his people, and have *looked forward* to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God.

For these are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions. And now, are they not his seed?” (Mosiah 15:11–12; emphasis added)

The Prophet Joseph Smith referred to these requirements as the “articles of adoption.”<sup>4</sup>

## Covenants and Adoption

Clearly, this process of adoption requires great effort on the part of the adoptee. We must remember, however, that the effort on the part of the adoptee is infinitesimally small in comparison to that of the Adopter. In fact, the Savior, by virtue of His Atonement, showers grace upon those who seek Him, enabling them in their efforts (see Bible Dictionary, “Grace,” 697). He invites all to come unto Him that we might be adopted by Him. This process begins with and is contingent upon our making covenants. Paul referenced the connection between adoption and covenants when he explained that members of the house of Israel are those “to whom pertaineth the *adoption*, and the glory, and the *covenants*, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises” (Romans 9:4; emphasis added).

Changes occur as the prospective adoptee enters into covenants and abides by them. King Benjamin rejoiced “with exceedingly great joy” (Mosiah 5:4) as he saw the changes wrought in his people through the covenants they had made. The prophet-king explained that two primary changes happened as they, through covenant, had been “spiritually begotten,” “born of him and . . . become his sons and his daughters” (v. 7). First, their hearts had been “changed through faith on his name” (v. 7). This change was obvious to Benjamin’s people, as they exclaimed that the Spirit had “wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (v. 2).

The second covenantal change was the name by which they should be known. Benjamin taught his people, “There is no other name given whereby salvation cometh; therefore, I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives” (v. 8). Understanding what it means to take upon oneself the name of Christ aids in our comprehension of and efforts toward adoption into the family of Christ.

An experience of the prophet Moses illuminates this doctrine. On one of the occasions when “the Lord spake unto Moses face to face” (Exodus 33:11), Israel’s prophet requested that the Lord might show unto him the Lord’s way so that he might know the Lord. Jehovah commanded Moses to go to Mount Sinai the next morning where the Lord promised to “proclaim the name of the Lord before [Moses]” (v. 19). The next morning, as Moses waited on the Mount, “the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord” (Exodus 34:5). What the Lord said is enlighten-

ing: “The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy . . . , forgiving iniquity” (vv. 6–7). By answering with a list of His attributes rather than with a proper name, the Lord tells us something of what it means to take upon ourselves His name. Additionally, He teaches us that to know His way, we must know His name and that to know His name is to know about His attributes and characteristics and about His redemptive role in our Heavenly Father’s plan. Those who covenant with the Lord to take upon themselves His name are essentially covenanting to take upon themselves the attributes He possesses in perfection. We promise to fulfill the commandment to “be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48).

The changes in a person who enters into covenants with God are not limited to the aforementioned two, however. The change in a person who draws near to the Redeemer through covenant is so significant that He referred to it as being “born again” (John 3:3). When Alma the Younger awakened from his coma-like experience, one of the very first things he related to the people was the Lord’s own words on the matter: “And the Lord said unto me: Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters; and thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (Mosiah 27:25–26).

Again, King Benjamin explained that this drastic change whereby we “[put] off the natural man” is possible only “through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (Mosiah 3:19). To become “as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (v. 19), and thereby qualify for adoption, requires the help of the Adopter. And not only does He have the power to so do but also He is the perfect Exemplar in that “the will of the Son [was] swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

The Prophet Joseph Smith gives further light on this process: “These teachings of the Saviour most clearly show unto us the nature of salvation, and what he proposed unto the human family when he proposed to save them—that he proposed to make them like unto himself, and he was like the Father, the great prototype of all saved beings; and for any portion of the human family to be assimilated into their likeness is to be saved; and to be unlike them is to be destroyed; and on this hinge turns the door of salvation.”<sup>25</sup>

## Enduring in Righteousness and Adoption

While the making of covenants is critical to our being adopted into the family of Christ, it is certainly not the end of the adoption process. King Benjamin acknowledged that transgression would cause the name of Christ to be “blotted out of your hearts” (Mosiah 5:11). Therefore, enduring in righteousness is requisite for receiving the blessings promised to heirs of the kingdom of heaven. The First Presidency correlate obedience and exaltation as follows: “Those who have been born unto God through obedience to the Gospel may by valiant devotion to righteousness obtain exaltation and even reach the status of godhood. . . . Yet, though they be gods they are still subject to Jesus Christ as their Father in this exalted relationship.”<sup>6</sup>

Moroni notes one essential requirement needed by those who will be adopted: “And after that he came men also were saved by faith in his name; and by faith, they become the sons of God” (Moroni 7:26). As people cultivate faith, they are enabled and strengthened as they strive to develop other Christlike attributes.

President Ezra Taft Benson taught about the virtues that are “part of the divine nature, or the Savior’s character.” He says, “The first characteristic, to which all the others are added, is *faith*. Faith is the foundation upon which a godlike character is built. It is a prerequisite for all other virtues.”<sup>7</sup>

In the postcrucifixion darkness, Jesus taught the Nephites of another requirement to being adopted by Him. He said, “And as many as have *received me*, to them have I given to become the sons of God; and even so will I to as many as shall believe on my name, for behold, by me redemption cometh” (3 Nephi 9:17; emphasis added). The question then becomes, How do we receive Him? A number of ways are outlined in scripture. On the same occasion, Jesus commented that “whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child, him will I receive, for of such is the kingdom of God. Behold, for such I have laid down my life, and have taken it up again; therefore repent, and come unto me ye ends of the earth, and be saved” (v. 22; see also Mosiah 3:19). On this and other occasions, the Lord makes clear the fact that to the degree we receive Him, we are received of Him.

Through the Prophet Joseph Smith the Lord explained that to receive the gospel is to receive Him and that “all those who receive my gospel are sons and daughters in my kingdom” (D&C 25:1). Additionally, the Savior expounded, “Whosoever receiveth my word receiveth me, and whosoever receiveth me, receiveth those, the First Presidency,

whom I have sent, whom I have made counselors for my name's sake unto you" (D&C 112:20). Plainly, the Lord expects those who would be adopted by and become joint-heirs with Him to follow Him—to follow Him by living His gospel and hearkening unto the words of His duly authorized representatives, especially the prophets (see Mosiah 15:11; D&C 84:88–89).

The Apostle Paul taught the Corinthian Saints that another requirement for their adoption into the family of Christ was contingent upon their cleanliness and avoidance of sin. He remarked:

And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.

And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. (2 Corinthians 6:16–18)

By enduring in righteousness through faith and receiving Him and avoiding sin, we seek to end this process of adoption that we began in the waters of baptism. The First Presidency's exposition on the Fatherhood of Jesus Christ emphasizes the need for continued faithfulness subsequent to the making of covenants: "Salvation is attainable only through compliance with the laws and ordinances of the Gospel; and all who are thus saved become sons and daughters unto God in a distinctive sense."<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

What a blessing is ours to know that Jesus Christ has descended below all things and worked out the infinite Atonement and that, by virtue of that sublime act, Jesus will adopt as His sons and daughters those who are faithful in mortality. The adopted ones will be those who, having made and kept covenants in faith and obedience over a lifetime, can answer affirmatively Alma's probing questions: "And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Alma 5:14). These are they who have been sealed His (see Mosiah 5:15) and who qualify for an inheritance, even a joint-inheritance with Jesus Christ in the celestial kingdom. The First Presidency again testifies of Christ's role as the father of our salvation: "If it be proper to speak of those who accept and abide

in the Gospel as Christ's sons and daughters—and upon this matter the scriptures are explicit and cannot be gainsaid nor denied—it is consistently proper to speak of Jesus Christ as the Father of the righteous, they having become His children and He having been made their Father through the second birth—the baptismal regeneration.”<sup>9</sup>

Paul's words cause the soul to hope and to rejoice at the prospects of adoption by the Atonement: “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: 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” (Romans 8:14–17). **RE**

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## Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, October 1990, 17; or *Ensign*, November 1990, 15.

2. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968), 467–68.

3. Robert K. Barnhart, ed., *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1988), s.v. “adoption.”

4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 328.

5. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 79.

6. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 470.

7. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1986, 59; or *Ensign*, November 1986, 45; emphasis in original.

8. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 468.

9. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 470.