## Adoption

In virtue of the believer’s position “in Christ” and His role as our representative, the believer may participate in Christ’s sonship to the degree that it is humanly possible. According to Scripture, our adoption into God’s family in connected with our union with Christ. We cite Ephesians 1:4-5 in this regard: “Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself.” Galatians 4:4-5 claims the same: “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

Believers in Jesus Christ are God’s children, members of His family. True believers are God’s children in two senses: (1) they are born again and therefore “partakers of the divine nature” (see chapter 14), and (2) they are adopted into God’s family. In a later chapter devoted to the new birth, we will discuss what exactly that experience involves and how it benefits us. In this chapter, though, we will investigate the idea of “adoption” and the benefits flowing from it.

Interestingly, John and Paul underscore different aspects of our status as God’s children. John emphasizes the new birth, while Paul devotes more attention to adoption. These different emphasizes in no way contradict or exclude one another. Paul’s goal in stressing adoption is to show God’s gracious action toward us in accepting us into His family, which He was in no way obligated to do. When John stresses new birth, he emphasizes the new character that believers obtain. As reborn children of God, we should reflect the character of our Heavenly Father.

Davis contrasts Paul’s perspective not only with John’s, but also with the apostle Peter’s: “While John and Peter prefer the picture of regeneration to portray the Christian adoption, Paul has characteristically chosen a legal image.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Bromiley, taking into consideration both aspects, claims that in Christ we have both the status of God’s children (adoption), and the character of God’s children (new birth).[[2]](#footnote-2) Rees agrees that the new birth relates to the “moral quality of the Christian experience,” while adoption addresses a “concrete relation of man to God.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Lidgett feels the same, associating adoption with obtaining status and privilege. He also notes, however, that Paul’s doctrine of adoption does not exclude the involvement of the Holy Spirit (Gal 4:6).[[4]](#footnote-4)

### А. Adoption as a Legal Status

As noted above, Paul focuses in his writings on the judicial act of adoption, which results in a definite legal status before God. We were formerly members of another family, but the Lord has adopted us into His. To describe this judicial act, Paul employs the word υἱοθεσία (*huiothesia*), meaning “adoption” and which is found in all the New Testament only in his writings.

Adoption was commonly practiced in Greco-Roman culture. Paul’s audience, then, was well acquainted with this idea. Unlike the Hebrews, the Greeks and Romans adopted freemen, not slaves. The adoptive father was even allowed to purchase children from their natural parents. In the Roman legal system, although adopted children possessed certain rights, they nonetheless came under the authority of their adoptive father and their position was little better than a slave.[[5]](#footnote-5) Adoption could also be considered an act of grace since the adoptive father was the initiator of the process.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, Rees hesitates to ascribe all these features of Greco-Roman adoption to Paul’s use of the metaphor.[[7]](#footnote-7) Although the secular understanding of adoption may shed some light on Paul’s usage, we have to distinguish Paul’s use of υἱοθεσία (*huiothesia*) from the secular one.

Let us examine passages where Paul refers to this concept, employing the term υἱοθεσία (*huiothesia*). Ephesians 1:4-5 reads, “...just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption (υἱοθεσία) as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.” Here, we learn that adoption was God’s plan from eternity past and that it is accomplished through Jesus Christ. God’s motive in adopting us was love.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Next, we cite Galatians 4:1-5:

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (υἱοθεσία).

Rees sees in this passage various aspects of civil adoption.[[9]](#footnote-9) First, the child receives an inheritance after the death of the parent. The sense of “redemption” is also present, in that the adopted child was purchased from another family. Unlike the Roman system, however, Rees notes that adoption by God cannot be characterized as a bondage to slavery. More in line with adoption in Hebrew (and even Greek) culture, our adoption by God is characterized by freedom. Jesus is the key player in this process, who identified with our position under the Law, released us from the status of a slave, and made possible our adoption as children of God.

Paul continues, “Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God” (Gal 4:6-7). As a result of our adoption in Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit. Although in the convert’s experience, adoption and new birth happen simultaneously, from a “legal” point of view, adoption logically precedes regeneration and is the basis for it. Additionally, in virtue of our adoption by God, we await an inheritance from Him.

Romans 8:15 is another key verse: “For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption (υἱοθεσία) as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’” The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption (υἱοθεσία), who gives us confidence in our relationship with the Father and makes possible intimate fellowship with Him. Verse 16 confirms this: “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.” In other words, the Spirit provides subjective confirmation of our status in God’s family. Therefore, adoption involves a transition from a position of slavery to one of freedom in the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 8:23, we observe another use of υἱοθεσία (*huiothesia*): “And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for {our} adoption (υἱοθεσία) as sons, the redemption of our body.” Adoption, then, has a future aspect – the redemption of the body. God’s salvation affects the whole person, including inheriting a glorious, immortal body. In addition, according to Romans 8:19-21, the material world will experience liberation from futility at the same time, creating conditions favorable to God’s adopted children.[[10]](#footnote-10)

We can combine the various senses of Paul’s use of υἱοθεσία (*huiothesia*) in the following summary. God’s plan from eternity past was to adopt believers in Jesus, whose redemptive death made this adoption possible. When persons turn to the Lord, they are liberated from the status of a slave and become children of God. The “Spirit of adoption,” the Holy Spirit, comes into the heart to give Christians the assurance of their acceptance into God’s family. At the coming of the Lord in glory, believers receive the full measure of their inheritance, including a glorified, resurrected body.

Finally, along with Brown, it is worth noting that the idea of adoption was not foreign to God’s Old Testament people, since Yahweh had received them to Himself. Correspondingly, Paul once employs υἱοθεσία (*huiothesia*) in relation to Israel: “…who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons” (Rom 9:4).[[11]](#footnote-11)

### B. The Fatherhood of God

Of all the titles that Holy Scripture ascribes to God, the one most fitting to depict His relationship to His people is “Father.” Jesus Himself taught us to pray “Our Father.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In Lidgett’s opinion, “To speak of God as ‘the Father,’ therefore, sums up the highest and fullest knowledge of Him,”[[13]](#footnote-13) and, “It is possible to take every other conception of the relations of God to men which can be offered, from the lowest to the highest, and to find all subsumed under the Fatherhood.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Conn adds that this metaphor describes a “unique interaction that would be difficult to communicate in the more formal vocabulary of a doctrinal statement.” Fatherhood is “a richly textured metaphor that evoke(s) from us not only an intellectual, but also an emotional response.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The value of this metaphor, unlike others like “shepherd,” is that it never grows old. In every culture and every generation, it remains relevant.[[16]](#footnote-16)

At the same time, every metaphor has its limits. God, of course, does not physically give birth. In addition, children eventually become independent of their parents. Yet, no one can live without God. Finally, our relationship with the Lord is much closer than our relationship with an earthly father.[[17]](#footnote-17)

We must note that God is “Father” not only in relation to people, but also from eternity. This is due to the relationships within the Trinity. Lidgett comments, “Fatherhood, then, is the determining relationship within the Godhead.”[[18]](#footnote-18) At the same time, one must keep in mind that this does not involve “essential inferiority (or) subsequent or created existence in regard to the Son.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Jaane adds an intriguing thought to our discussion.[[20]](#footnote-20) Fatherhood implies “source” or “origin.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This coincides with an ancient conception of the Trinity, that the Son is eternally “begotten” by the Father, and that the Spirit eternally “proceeds” from the Father (see an evaluation of this view in volume 3, chapter 8).

Jaane also notes that God is Father not because He occupies that position, but because of His nature:

God is father, not by independent decision, but in His very nature and being. God is not love because He loves; He loves because He is love. God is not a father because He has a son; He has a son because He is a father.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Scripture also uses the metaphor “mother” in reference to the Lord (see Matt 23:27; Ps 130:2; Isa 66:12-13). In addition, God expects from His “children” qualities that correspond to that position, like simple faith, wonder at His works, expectation of good, and obedience.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**1. In Creation**

Some hold the view that based on the facts that: (1) God is “Father” by His very nature, and (2) that He created all things, He is therefore Father of all creation and all of humanity. Blekkink comments, “By virtue of creation God is the Universal Father – of nature, of nations, of spirits, and of man in particular.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Angels, in fact, are called “sons of God” (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7).[[25]](#footnote-25)

Jaane expresses this thought in the following way:

Since the created world has its source in God the Creator, it shares in the power and glory of God and is thus a revelation of its Maker. Man, too, has his origin in God, and as the image of his Father he shares in the nature of his Father.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The following proofs are offered for this theory.[[27]](#footnote-27) First, in Luke’s genealogy, Christ’s lineage traces back to Adam, who was the “son of God” (Lk 3:38). We recall that God created Adam and Eve “after His image” (Gen 1:26). Second, Paul states that from the Father “every family in heaven and on earth derives its name” (Eph 3:15). So then, He is the “archetypical father.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Moreover, some authors ascribe the parable of the Prodigal Son not to wayward Christians, but to all people, who, in virtue of being created by God, are His children.

Furthermore, since God possesses the quality of “father” eternally, one would expect Him to hold such a relationship to all that He created. He is the “Father of spirits” (Heb 12:9). As the Heavenly Father, He bestows favor on all created things (Jam 1:17; Matt 6:25-30). Conn notes that in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus often says “our Father.” He suggests that Jesus was addressing not only His disciples, but all those present at the event, which would imply that God’s fatherhood extends to all people.[[29]](#footnote-29) The following verses are also notable:

- …one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all (Eph 4:6).[[30]](#footnote-30)

- Some of your own poets have said, “For we also are His children.” Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man (Acts 17:28-29).

Moreover, Jesus is thought to be the ideal model of the sonship of all humanity.[[31]](#footnote-31) Since His incarnation reflects the perfect expression of human nature, His sonship is supposedly the sonship of all people. For this reason, it is felt that He called Himself the “Son of Man.” Similarly, Lidgett argues that the Son establishes “the fundamental lines and the spiritual possibilities of all humanity.”[[32]](#footnote-32) At the same time, the special status of Jesus Christ in relation to the Godhead is not denied. He is the Son of God both in a divine sense and as a model for us.

Based on the points mentioned above, supporters of the theory of God’s universal fatherhood conclude that sonship is the natural condition of humanity before God.[[33]](#footnote-33) God’s predetermined plan for humanity is to “bring many sons to glory” (Heb 2:10).

Salvation, then, is understood as the “completion of creation.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Salvation involves recognizing God’s fatherhood, as Lidgett states, “We do not make the Fatherhood, but recognize it and respond to it. And in that recognition is our salvation.”[[35]](#footnote-35) The new birth, then, is the restoration of a person’s natural potential for sonship.

In support of this theory, it is noted that Jesus spoke with an unbeliever (the Samaritan woman) about the “Father” (Jn 4:19-21). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called the people to “be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:45). In other words, they are to occupy the position that is already theirs by right.

However, this theory does not propose that unbelievers in Jesus are saved or enjoy the status of God’s children in the full sense. The Scriptures speak of unbelievers as children of the devil (Jn 8:44; 1 Jn 3:10) and children of wrath (Eph 2:3). Rees feels that such people have lost the “reality” of sonship, but not the “potential.” Like the Prodigal Son, they may always come home.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Furthermore, Rees writes that Paul “conceives man outside Christ as morally an alien and a stranger from God, and the change wrought by faith in Christ makes him morally a son and conscious of his sonship; but naturally he is always a potential son because God is always a real father.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Conn also affirms that all persons are God’s children in a “general sense,” but they must still be born again in order to experience God fully.[[38]](#footnote-38) Similarly, Lidgett writes that sonship “is completely realized only in believers in Christ.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Barker confirms that “sonship” in the sense of “creature” differs from how the New Testament employs the concept, and that “it is in Christ alone, and by faith in Him, that God’s purpose is worked out in them and they have their sonship.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Finally, Jaane correctly affirms that we must distinguish God’s so-called “universal fatherhood” from the pantheistic conception that creation is an emanation from God. The Lord does not “give birth” to creation in the sense that it is part of His being. He created all things from nothing, distinct from Himself.[[41]](#footnote-41)

**2. In the Old Testament**

If we accept that, due to His role as Creator, God can be considered (in a certain sense) the Father of all created things, He is even more so a Father to His Old Testament people, Israel. In comparison to creation, “Israel stands in a unique relation to God.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

However, Blekkink correctly observes that the Old Testament underscores God’s sovereignty more than His fatherhood.[[43]](#footnote-43) Lidgett supposes that initially it was necessary for Yahweh to display His authority and righteousness so that subsequently his fatherhood would not “sink to naturalism and sentimentality.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Stein makes note of the fact that in the Old Testament, we see a tendency to avoid the father metaphor. He considers that Old Testament writers feared association of the God of Israel with the so-called “fertility religions.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Nonetheless, the Old Testament does reveal God as Father. We shall highlight some instances.

First, the father-metaphor is used to show that Israel belongs to Yahweh.[[46]](#footnote-46) Israel had this status even during its time of captivity in Egypt: “When Israel {was} a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son” (Hos 11:1). God spoke to Pharaoh by Moses, “Thus says Yahweh, ‘Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I said to you, “Let My son go that he may serve Me.”’” (Ex 4:22-23). Moreover, Israel maintained this position throughout its history: “David said, ‘Blessed are You, O Yahweh God of Israel our father, forever and ever” (1 Chr 29:10). Through Isaiah, Yahweh spoke to the sons of Jacob, “You are Mine” (Isa 43:1).

The special position of Israel before Yahweh afforded them a close relationship with Him. Isaiah writes about the love of the Father for His people, “You are precious in My sight,… you are honored and I love you” (Isa 43:4). This close relationship is expressed in other metaphors, such as (1) husband: “Your husband is your Maker, whose name is Yahweh of hosts” (Isa 54:5); “You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of Yahweh, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God…. {As} a young man marries a virgin, {so} your sons will marry you; and {as} the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, {so} your God will rejoice over you” (Isa 62:3-5), and (2) mother: “Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you” (Isa 49:15); “You will be nursed, you will be carried on the hip and fondled on the knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you” (Isa 66:12-13).[[47]](#footnote-47)

As a good father, Yahweh promises to care for Israel. We witness this particularly during Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, “where you saw how Yahweh your God carried you, just as a man carries his son” (Deut 1:31). His care for His people finds expression in still another metaphor – the shepherd (see Ps 28:9; 77:20; 80:1; 100:3; 95:7; Isa 40:11). The most inspiring and well known depiction of God our shepherd is contained in Psalm 23:

Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh forever.

In addition, God shows special fatherly care for the orphan. He is “a father of the fatherless” (Ps 68:5).[[48]](#footnote-48)

Due to God’s promise to care for His people, Israel, the latter find themselves in a position of dependence on Him, as Isaiah writes, “For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not recognize us. You, Yahweh, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is Your name” (Isa 63:16).

Along with the blessings that flow from the position of sonship, responsibilities ensue as well. As God’s children, Israel was called to behave accordingly: “You are the sons of Yahweh your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave your forehead for the sake of the dead” (Deut 14:1).[[49]](#footnote-49) Israel must honor the Lord (Mal 1:6) and not act unfaithfully toward one another (Mal 2:10).[[50]](#footnote-50) Yahweh is to Israel both a provider and a nurturer.[[51]](#footnote-51) For example, He taught His people to trust Him during their journey through the wilderness: “Thus you are to know in your heart that Yahweh your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son” (Deut 8:5). Israel must be as clay in Yahweh’s hands (Isa 64:8).

Unfortunately, God’s Old Testament people seldom fulfilled the responsibilities of sonship.[[52]](#footnote-52) The sons of Israel were “faithless sons” (Jer 3:14, 22) and “rebellious children… false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of Yahweh” (Isa 30:1, 9). They “neglected the Rock who begot (them), and forgot the God who gave (them) birth” (Deut 32:18). God said of them, “Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me” (Isa 1:2; сf. Jer 3:19-20). It came to the point that God refused to acknowledge the nation of Israel as His children: “{They are} not His children, because of their defect; {but are} a perverse and crooked generation” (Deut 32:5; сf. Jer 3:3-4).

Consequently, several passages of Scripture identify only faithful followers of Yahweh as His children:

- Then those who feared Yahweh spoke to one another, and Yahweh gave attention and heard {it,} and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear Yahweh and who esteem His name. “They will be Mine,” says Yahweh of hosts, “on the day that I prepare {My} own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.” So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him (Mal 3:16-18).

- Just as a father has compassion on {his} children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear Him (Ps 103:13).

Cameron makes the following comment: “He is the Father of the God-fearing among the nation rather than of the nation as a whole.”[[53]](#footnote-53)

However, in the future all Israel will be included in the number of Yahweh’s children.[[54]](#footnote-54) Hosea prophesied, “Yet the number of the sons of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered; and in the place where it is said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ it will be said to them, ‘{You are} the sons of the living God’” (Hos 1:10). We can consider this restoration to be the fulfillment of God’s original intention for Israel: “With weeping they will come, and by supplication I will lead them; I will make them walk by streams of waters, on a straight path in which they will not stumble; for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn” (Jer 31:9).

Along with Israel and its “faithful remnant,” the sons of David are considered Yahweh’s sons in a special sense.[[55]](#footnote-55) At first, this status was conferred upon Solomon (1 Chr 28:6), but then extended to all the descendants of David, especially the Messiah, who will build the temple of God (2 Sam 7:13) and will rule the whole earth (Ps 2:8; 89:27).

Finally, in Genesis 6 we discover that the “sons of God” went into the daughters of men. Who are these “sons of God?” We addressed this question in chapter 3 of this volume.

**3. In the Intertestamental Period**

It will interest us to discover the understanding of fatherhood among the intertestamental writers. Stein notes that in imitation of the Old Testament, writers hesitated to employ this metaphor during this period. Nevertheless, he draws our attention to several passages.[[56]](#footnote-56)

The Apocrypha offers some insights. The righteous person “vaunteth that God is his father” (*Wis. Sol.*, 2.16). In chapter 14 of this work, the author appeals to God in prayer as “Father” (14.3). Tobit exclaims, “Because he is our Lord, and he our God, and he our Father” (*Tobit*, 13.4). Similarly, Sirach prays to God, “O Lord, Father, and God of my life, abandon me not to their counsel” (*Sirach*, 23.4; сf. 51.14).

We draw from the pseudepigraphic literature as well. Like Sirach, Eleazer also addresses God in prayer as “Father” (*3 Macc.*, 6.2, 6). We read in the same work, “But the Jews… with crying that would not be silenced, all called with tears on the almighty Lord and ruler of all power, their merciful God and father” (*3 Macc.,* 5.6-8).

Concerning the “star of Jacob,” we read, “And the heavens shall be opened unto him, to pour out the spirit, (even) the blessing of the Holy Father” (*Testament of Judah,* 24.2). When the righteous priest comes, “The heavens shall be opened, and from the temple of glory shall come upon him sanctification, with the Father’s voice as from Abraham to Isaac” (*Testament of Levi,* 18.6).

Cameron makes the helpful observation that in these quotations (except, possibly, for *3 Macc.*, 5.4), the passages speak of certain faithful individuals as God’s children, not of Israel in general.[[57]](#footnote-57) In addition, the following texts, which do speak of entire Israel as God’s children, apply to the eschatological period:

- And their souls will cleave to Me and to all My commandments, and they will fulfil My commandments, and I will be their Father and they shall be My children. And they all shall be called children of the living God (*Jubilees*, 1.24-25).

- All shall know that I am the God of Israel and the Father of all the children of Jacob, and King on Mount Zion for all eternity (*Jubilees,* 1.28).

The final instance we will cite is Abraham’s blessing on Jacob: “And may the Lord God be a father to thee and thou the first-born son, and to the people alway” (*Jubilees,* 19.29).

**4. In the New Testament**

Unlike the Old Testament witness and the works of the Second Temple Period, the New Testament abounds with references to God’s fatherhood and the sonship of believers. This is especially notable in the Gospels, where mentions of God as “Father” occurs twice as often as in all the other New Testament writings combined. The Gospel of John leads in this respect, with 111 references to God as “Father.” The Synoptic Gospels record 65 cases.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Paul calls God “Father” more than 40 times and uses this title in blessings (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3), glorifications (Rom 15:6), thanksgivings (2 Cor 1:3; 1 Thes 1:2-3), prayers (Col 1:12), exhortations (Eph 5:20), and expressions of faith (1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:6).[[59]](#footnote-59)

The New Testament reveals that God’s eternal plan is to adopt us (Eph 1:5). His desire is to “lead many sons to glory” (Heb 2:10). God “deals with you as with sons” (Heb 12:7). All creation waits with anticipation for the revelation of the children of God (Rom 8:19-21).[[60]](#footnote-60) Rees comments, “The whole course and destiny of creation is for the ‘revealing of the sons of (G)od.’”[[61]](#footnote-61) In the words of Lidgett, God’s fatherhood for believers in Christ determines “the whole spirit, conduct, and conditions of their life.”[[62]](#footnote-62)

According to New Testament teaching, God is Father first and foremost in relation to His eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Christ has a distinctive relationship with the Father, as He Himself said, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me?” (Jn 14:10), and, “O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You” (Jn 17:25).[[63]](#footnote-63)

Since the Lord Jesus possesses a perfect consciousness of His relationship with the Father, He is qualified to serve as the archetypical Son, who is able to inspire us to live in the light of our privileged position before the Father as well. The New Testament associates our sonship with His, since He became “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29) and, consequently, “He is not ashamed to call (us) brethren” (Heb 2:11).[[64]](#footnote-64) God’s goal is to make us “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29).

However, we must clarify that our status as children of God fundamentally differs from Christ’s sonship. Jesus occupies a unique position in relation to God the Father. He is the “only-begotten Son” and enjoys a distinctive relationship with the Father, being Himself God.

It is interesting to note that Jesus never equated His position with the Father with that of His disciples. He never used the phrase “our Father” in a way that included both the disciples and Himself. We recall that He said to Mary Magdalene, “Go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God’” (Jn 20:17). Note that Jesus did not say “our God” or “our Father,” but “My Father and your Father,” and, “My God and your God.” He thus distinguished His status as the Son of God from the status of His disciples.

Stein makes the same observation from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Concerning the disciples, He states, “your Father” (Matt 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 6), while in relation to Himself – “My Father” (Matt 7:21; сf. Matt 10:32-33). Stein concludes, “His ‘Sonship’ was different from that of his followers. He was by nature the Son; they were ‘sons’ through adoption.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Cameron adds that Christ “was aware of standing in an intimate and unparalleled relation” with the Father and that He was the “sole mediator between God and humans” (Matt 11:27).[[66]](#footnote-66)

In His capacity as the “archetypical son,” and “only mediator,” Jesus becomes the only and unique way to adoption into God’s family. Although the New Testament at times hints as God’s universal fatherhood (see above), in most cases it reserves that designation for believers in God’s eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Cameron writes,

While accepting the teaching of the OT that all persons are children of God by creation and receive his providential kindness (Matt. 5:45), (Jesus) also taught that sin has brought about a change in people, necessitating rebirth and reconciliation to God.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Rees adds the comment that the New Testament teaching of sonship differs from the Old Testament teaching in that the former view is independent of physical descent or nationality: “Through Christ men and women of all races and nations may now be the children of God.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

Since people do not become God’s children (at least in the fullest sense) by virtue of creation, the New Testament invites all to join God’s family through faith in Christ (Gal 3:26; 1 Jn 5:1).[[69]](#footnote-69) One must be born again (Jn 3:3) to become God’s child (Matt 18:3).[[70]](#footnote-70)

The biblical idea of sonship is characterized by freedom, not bondage (Rom 8:15). God’s children have “boldness and confident access through faith in Him” (Eph 3:12). Rees writes, “With this free union of love with God there comes a sense of power, of independence of circumstances, of mastery over the world, and of the possession of all things necessary that befit the heirs of God.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

Since God is Father, the New Testament not infrequently speaks of His fatherly love for His children.[[72]](#footnote-72) He is “merciful” (Lk 6:36), “knows what you need before you ask Him,” (Matt 6:8), gives “what is good to those who ask Him” (Matt 7:11), and “has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). In addition, “The very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt 10:30), and, “It is not {the} will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish” (Matt 18:14).

 Our heavenly Father is the model for holiness (1 Pet 1:15; Matt 5:48) as well as love (Matt 5:45; Lk 6:36; Eph 4:32). Paul summarizes, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph 5:1).

**5. In Church History**

To summarize the Church’s teaching on God’s fatherhood, we will rely on the work of Lidgett and the writings of some eminent Christian thinkers.[[73]](#footnote-73) The topic of God’s fatherhood was addressed often, yet from different vantage points.

Clement of Rome, for example, focuses on the Father’s kind disposition to believers: “The all-merciful and beneficent Father has bowels [of compassion] towards those that fear Him, and kindly and lovingly bestows His favours upon those who come to Him with a simple mind” (*1 Clem.,* 23). God is a “gracious and merciful Father, who has made us partakers in the blessings of His elect” (*1 Clem.,* 29). Clement also mentions the universal aspect of God’s fatherhood: God is “the Creator and Father of all worlds” (*1 Clem.,* 35).

The writer “Barnabas” also speaks of the Father’s kind disposition to us: “We ought therefore, being possessed of understanding, to perceive the gracious intention of our Father; for He speaks to us, desirous that we, not going astray like them (the Jews)” (*Barn.,* 2).

Similar to Clement of Rome, Tatian refers to God as the universal Father: “He is invisible, impalpable, being Himself the Father of both sensible and invisible things” (*Address to the Greeks,* 4). Justin Martyr approaches this theme as well when He calls God the “God the Father of all” (*1 Apol.,* 12). Justin gives more attention, though, to God’s attributes: He is “the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues” (*1 Apol.,* 6). For Justin, the title “Father” reflects “His good deeds and functions” (*2 Apol.,* 6).

Irenaeus treats the topic in a similar way. On the one hand, in His role as Creator, God is Father of all: “He is the only God, the only Lord, the only Creator, the only Father, alone containing all things, and Himself commanding all things into existence” (*Against Heresies,* 2.1.1); “…being alone is truly God and Father, who both formed this world, fashioned man” (2.28.1); and, “they should call the Maker of this universe the Father, who exercises a providence over all things” (3.25.1). On the other hand, Irenaeus also emphasizes the Father’s attributes – the Father is a God of righteousness (3.25.2-3).

Origen, in turn, describes the various relationships of the Members of the Trinity with humans. The Holy Spirit sanctifies people, the Son gives them reason, and the Father is the source of their being: “They derive their existence from God the Father” (*De Principiis,* 1.3.8). In this way, Origen also affirms the universal nature of God’s fatherhood.

Unlike those thinkers mentioned above, Athanasius understands God’s fatherhood more in relation to the believer’s position in Christ. Furthermore, he links believers’ sonship with the theme of deification.

Over time, the Western Church began more and more to emphasize God’s sovereignty and marginalize His role as Father. We can include Augustine and Aquinas in this number. Similarly, the Reformers also devoted little attention to God’s fatherhood. They preferred other metaphors, such as God the warrior or king. In addition, God is not the Father of all, but only of believers in Jesus. Calvin writes,

For with what confidence could any man call God his Father? Who would have the presumption to arrogate to himself the honour of a son of God were we not gratuitously adopted as his sons in Christ? (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.36).

For believers, then, God’s fatherhood implies His merciful and tender care for us. Calvin also writes, “Hence he both calls himself our Father, and is pleased to be so called by us, by this delightful name relieving us of all distrust, since nowhere can a stronger affection be found than in a father. Hence, too, he could not have given us a stronger testimony of his boundless love than in calling us his sons” (*Ibid.*).

### C. Benefits of our Sonship

Without doubt, the fatherhood of God means for us that He is compassionate toward us and cares for us, as it is written: “Just as a father has compassion on {his} children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear Him.”[[74]](#footnote-74) Therefore, we may expect to find in God’s Word how the Lord expresses His fatherly care for us. We will discover that we may have intimate fellowship with Him, that he trains us in His ways, that we benefit from His provision and protection, and that we can anticipate both answers to prayer in this life and a glorious future inheritance. In this section, we will delve into the revelation of these marvelous expressions of God’s father-heart toward His children.

**1. Fellowship with God**

Throughout biblical history, the true people of God have valued the privilege of fellowship with the Lord and access to His presence. Adam and Eve enjoyed direct fellowship with their Creator. Enoch “walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” (Gen 5:24). Moses also enjoyed close fellowship with God, with whom he spoke “face to face” (Num 12:8).

The people of Israel in general also enjoyed a special relationship with Yahweh. Moses declared, “For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is Yahweh our God whenever we call on Him?” (Deut 4:7). In addition, the psalmist calls the sons of Israel “a people near to Him” (Ps 148:14). He also rejoices that God is “my portion” (Ps 142:5).

The experience of God’s presence is gloriously describedin the following passages: “In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Ps 16:11); “I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake” (Ps 17:15); “You make him joyful with gladness in Your presence” (Ps 21:6); “They drink their fill of the abundance of Your house; and You give them to drink of the river of Your delights” (Ps 36:8). However, in Old Testament times holiness was required to enjoy God’s presence (Ps 15; 140:13; Zech 14:6-7), as well as humility (Ps 138:6; Isa 57:18; 66:2).

Nearness to God is well expressed in the New Testament in Galatians 4:6, where we read, “Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (сf. Rom 8:15-16). We encounter in this verse the expression “Abba.” The respected scholar Gerhard Kittel describes the significance of this term: “This Aramaic word is a familiar term for ‘father’; it is also a title for rabbis and a proper name, but is almost never used for God.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

In prayer to God the Father, Jesus calls Him “Abba” (Mk 14:36). Although this is the only text in Jesus’ sayings that contains this appellation, it was likely His typical address to Him. In other texts, though, we encounter in Jesus’ prayers the typical Greek word for father, i.e., πάτερ (*pater*).[[76]](#footnote-76) Kittel explains, “Jesus probably used *abbá* for God not only in Mk. 14:36 but also whenever the Gk. *patḗr* occurs. It denotes childlike intimacy and trust, not disrespect.”[[77]](#footnote-77) According to Galatians 4:6, however, not only Jesus has the right to address the Father as “Abba,” but His followers do as well.

Since children in Israel addressed their fathers as “Abba,” some feel the best English equivalent for this term is “daddy.” Stein challenges this claim, since not only did small children use this address, but older children and adult children did as well.[[78]](#footnote-78) Nevertheless, since children tend to enjoy a close relationship with their father even in adulthood, we can conclude that the use of “Abba” implies intimate familial ties. Robison asserts that such a relationship provides “a safe environment” and “intimacy and trust.”[[79]](#footnote-79)

Frost, then, sees two sides to our relationship to God. On the one hand, God is “Daddy” to us, that is, we enjoy closeness and intimacy with Him. On the other hand, we also enjoy a more “mature,” responsible relationship with Him as “Father.”[[80]](#footnote-80)

**2. The Father’s Nurture**

As a good Father, God nurtures and trains His children. The Old Testament is full of examples where Yahweh sought to teach Israel His ways. The Law of Moses was to fulfill that function. The word *Tora* (תוֹרָה), in fact, means “instruction.”[[81]](#footnote-81)

However, when God’s people violated the Law and strayed from Him, He nonetheless attempted to restore them to Himself. He warned them through the prophets (2 Kin 17:13), sent various afflictions (1 King 17:1), inflicted with sickness (Ps 38:3-4), and raised up enemies against them (2 Kin 13:3). His goal in all this was not to exterminate His people, but to correct them: “Yahweh has disciplined me severely, but He has not given me over to death” (Ps 118:18), and, “Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction” (Isa 48:10).

God’s discipline of His children is only for a season: “For in a very little while My indignation {against you} will be spent and My anger {will be directed} to their destruction” (Isa 10:25), and comfort will follow: “’Comfort, O comfort My people,’ says your God. ‘Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of Yahweh’s hand double for all her sins’” (Isa 40:1-2).

The psalmist finds much value in God’s discipline. This theme is repeated several times in Psalm 119: “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word” (v. 67); “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes” (v. 71); and, “I know, O Yahweh, that Your judgments are righteous, and that in faithfulness You have afflicted me” (v. 75).

The New Testament follows along the same lines. God’s children are expected to behave in a certain way.[[82]](#footnote-82) Jesus Himself described God’s children as those who love their enemies (Matt 5:44-45) and seek peace (Matt 5:9). Paul writes on this theme, “…so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15). Moreover, God’s children imitate their Father (Eph 5:1) and are led by His Spirit (Rom 8:14).

The apostle John lays heavy stress on this aspect of our adoption. God’s children practice righteousness (1 Jn 3:10), walk in love (1 Jn 4:7), do not sin (1 Jn 5:18), and overcome the world (1 Jn 5:4). Peter warns, “If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay {on earth}” (1 Pet 1:17).

It is interesting to note that the Scriptures sometimes speak of adoption as an established fact, but sometimes as a future event. An example of the first is 1 John 3:1, where we read, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and {such} we are.” On the other hand, the Bible at times seems to make adoption conditional on attaining victory over sin (see 2 Cor 6:17-18; Rev 21:7). This does not contradict the earlier statements of our acceptance into God’s family now, but serves as a confirmation that our adoption as sons and daughters found expression in our practical lives.

The main term to describe God’s action of spiritual nurture is παιδεύω (*paideuo*), or in the nominal form παιδεία (*paideia*). This term has a wide spectrum of meaning, including “instruction” (Tit 2:12; Acts 7:22; 22:3), “reproof” (2 Tim 2:25; 2 Tim 3:16; Еф 6:4), and “discipline” (Rev 3:19; 1 Tim 1:20; 1 Cor 11:32; Lk 23:16; 23:22; 2 Cor 6:9). All these meanings are interrelated. Sometimes instruction requires reproof and discipline, and reproof and discipline are done for the purpose of instruction and nurture.

 A key passage expounding on the theme of God’s nurturing is Hebrews 12:5-11, where the words παιδεύω(*paideuo*) andπαιδεία (*paideia*) are found eight times and are translated “discipline”:

…and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by him; for those whom the Lord loves he disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom {his} father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He {disciplines us} for {our} good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

The Bible records several means by which the Lord may discipline His children. His preferred method is through His Word (2 Tim 3:16). God desires that His people would keep His Word without the need for Him to resort to other measures. However, in order to stir some on to obedience, He may employ other methods: (1) He can send difficulties (Hag 1:9) or illness (1 Cor 11:30), (2) the Church may apply various means of discipline (1 Cor 5:13), or (3) believers could pass away prematurely because of disobedience (1 Cor 11:30).

When God punishes believers’ disobedience, His goal is correction. Hebrews 12 confirms this: “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (v. 11).

Finally, some writers comment that nurture and the discipline that sometimes results from it is administered in the context of family, that is, in the context of our position as God’s children. Frost and Conn assert that we become responsive children in an atmosphere of love.[[83]](#footnote-83) Lidgett states that God’s methods may include discipline, but His motive is love and His goal is fellowship.[[84]](#footnote-84)

**3. The Father’s Provision**

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus clearly revealed that the Father is interested in our material well-being. He taught His disciples to pray, “Our Father who is in heaven… give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11). Furthermore, Scripture contains not a few references that confirm that truth, both in the Old and New Testaments.

Beginning with the Garden of Eden (Gen 1:29),[[85]](#footnote-85) God always provided His people with every necessity. Even under unfavorable conditions, God miraculously provided for His own. He took care of Jacob during a famine (Gen 47), gave Israel food in the wilderness (Ex 16), and fed Elijah during a drought (1 Kin 17).

The Psalms often pick up the theme of God as Provider: ”You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:16), He “gives food to the hungry” (Ps 146:7), and “satisfies you with the finest of the wheat” (Ps 147:14). “The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they who seek Yahweh shall not be in want of any good thing” (Ps 34:10), but “in the days of famine they will have abundance” (Ps 37:19).[[86]](#footnote-86) The psalmist testifies from personal experience, “I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his descendants begging bread” (Ps 37:25).

In addition, Jesus Himself instructed His disciples to rely on God’s provision and care:

Do not worry then, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear for clothing?” For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Paul echoes this thought in this marvelous promise from the Lord: “My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). Conn confirms, “The foundation of a happy life is the knowledge that we matter to God. We are His children, and He wants good things for us, even to the point of becoming actively involved in the everyday affairs of our lives.”[[87]](#footnote-87)

The Bible talks not only of God providing our needs, but also of His desire that we prosper. The Old Testament relates the history of many wealthy people who served the Lord: Noah, Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Solomon, and others. Noah “was the greatest of all the men of the east” (Job 1:3). Abraham “was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold” (Gen 13:2). It is written of David, “David became greater and greater, for Yahweh of hosts {was} with him” (1 Chr 11:9). In Solomon’s day, we learn that he “made silver and gold as plentiful in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedars as plentiful as sycamores in the lowland” (2 Chr 1:15).

Furthermore, according to the Mosaic Law, obedient Israel could expect great prosperity (Lev 26; Deut 28). The psalmist prays that God would prosper His people (Ps 144:12-15) and believes that God “satisfies your years with good things” (Ps 103:5), that we will “see the goodness of Yahweh in the land of the living” (Ps 27:13), and that “goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life” (Ps 23:6).

The New Testament does not lack references to God’s desire to prosper His people. The apostle John wishes that believers would “in all respects… prosper and be in good health” (3 Jn 2). Paul declares that God “richly supplies us with all things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17) and that God “is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (2 Cor 9:8).

Although God is ready to meet all our material needs, the Bible also warns Christians not to rely on one’s wealth (1 Tim 6:17; Matt 6:24), and that the love of money can be a hindrance to spiritual life and bring much grief (1 Tim 6:9-10; Matt 19:24). Believers must always look to God as the source of well-being.

The Bible exhorts us to be content with what we have. Paul learned “to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (Phil 4:11). The epistle to the Hebrews instructs us, “{Make sure that} your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you’” (Heb 13:5). Conn comments, “A loving God might well keep those doors closed if He knows that we are not spiritually mature enough to handle the tough choices which material success brings.”[[88]](#footnote-88)

To benefit from God’s provision involves fulfilling certain conditions. The Old Testament reveals that God prospers the righteous: “For it is You who blesses the righteous man, O Yahweh, You surround him with favor as with a shield” (Ps 5:12), and, “No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps 84:11; сf. Ps 92:12). Solomon revealed the secret of his father David’s success, “You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You” (1 Kin 3:6). Solomon’s dedication to Yahweh also led to his success (1 Kin 3:13).

Correspondingly, prosperity comes to those who fear God: “O fear Yahweh, you His saints; for to those who fear Him there is no want. The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they who seek Yahweh shall not be in want of any good thing” (Ps 34:9-10), and, “How blessed is the man who fears Yahweh…. Wealth and riches are in his house (Ps 112:3; сf. Ps 128:1-4). Those who honor God’s Word enjoy the same promise: “…his delight is in the law of Yahweh… in whatever he does, he prospers” (Ps 1:3; сf. Josh 1:8), as well as those who honor God’s kingdom (Matt 6:33).

Those who are righteous and fear God fulfill the condition for prosperity of obedience: “If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land” (Isa 1:19; сf. Lev 11; Deut 28). Once God exclaimed, “Oh that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways!... I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (Ps 81:13-16).

Other factors lead to the prosperity of God’s people. To prosper, one must work: “The hand of the diligent makes rich” (Prov 10:4: сf. Ecc 5:19; 2 Thes 3:12).[[89]](#footnote-89) Paul even commanded the church, “If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either” (2 Thes 3:10).

A guiding norm for prosperity is the principle of giving and receiving. The Bible abounds with references to the connection between giving and receiving material blessing. Some key ones are as follows:

- The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered (Prov 11:25)

- Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure--pressed down, shaken together, {and} running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return (Lk 6:38)

This giving can be directed to God (Prov 3:9-10; Mal 3:10), the poor (Isa 58:7-11; Ps 41:1-3; Prov 19:17), or parents (Eph 6:2-3). In every case, the giver can expect material blessing. A fine example of this principle in practice is when a widow provided for God’s prophet with what was left of her food and received an abundance in return (1 Kin 17:10-13).

Related to the principle of giving and receiving, the Bible also teaches the principle of the “cycle of prosperity.” First, we must understand that Scripture exhorts those who have something to give to share their blessings with others: “Instruct those who are rich in this present world… to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (1 Tim 6:17-18). Paul also explains that believers work and earn wages not for themselves, but in order to have the means to bless others (Eph 4:28). After embracing these truths, we go on to the main passage outlining the “cycle of prosperity” – 2 Corinthians 9:8: “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.”

We note that, first of all, God is ready to meet all our needs. Believers never need to question whether God will provide for them as He promised: “…so that always having all sufficiency in everything….” Second, God promises not only to fulfill our needs, but also to financially bless us beyond our needs. He does so, so that we “may have an abundance for every good deed.” Finally, it is important to keep in mind that this passage is found in a context of giving. This means that only those who give can expect to receive God’s provision and participate in this “cycle of prosperity.”

We can now outline the “cycle of prosperity.” Out of obedience to the Lord, Christians give of their resources to bless His kingdom and others in need. God then responds by returning to the giver even a greater abundance, according to the promise “he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Cor 9:6; also see Lk 6:38). So then, the more someone gives, the more this individual will receive, and the more this individual receives, the more he or she is enabled to give. This is the “cycle of prosperity,” which actually is a spiral, leading to ever-increasing prosperity for the purpose of ever-increasing generosity.

**4. The Father’s Protection**

As a loving Father, God guards His children. Jesus taught His disciples to pray to the Father, “Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt 6:13).

The Old Testament narrative recounts not a few instances of God protecting His people. We recall the time when God protected Jacob from his offended brother Esau (Gen 33). In Egypt, not one of the plagues that troubled the Egyptians came near the Israelites (Ex 7ff). In the wilderness, God sent “an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared” (Ex 23:20).[[90]](#footnote-90) When Israel was preparing for the conquest of Canaan, Yahweh guarded the two spies sent out to survey the land (Josh 2). As a reward for attendance at the required feast days, God promised His people, “No man shall covet your land” in their absence (Ex 34:24).

Going on to David’s time, we observe that God granted him divine protection as well. A notable instance was when David and his men recovered all their persons and property after being raided by a hostile tribe (1 Sam 30:18-19). In addition, God sheltered David from Saul’s hand many times (1 Sam 19ff). It is not surprising that David, upon reflection, glorified God:

Yahweh is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge; my savior, You save me from violence. I call upon Yahweh, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies (2 Sam 22:2-4).

We can highlight other remarkable instances of God’s protection. When Ahaziah sent soldiers to take Elijah, fire came down from heaven and consumed them (2 Kin 1). Elijah’s protégé, Elisha, also enjoyed supernatural security. When the king of Aram sent an army to seize him, God struck them with blindness so that they did not recognize him (2 Kin 6).

Most of the passages extolling God as Protector are found in the book of Psalms. Many times, the psalmist calls upon God to protect him from enemies.[[91]](#footnote-91) However, we also find in the Psalms concrete promises of God’s protection. We will list a few examples:

- In peace I will both lie down and sleep, For You alone, O Yahweh, make me to dwell in safety (Ps 4:8).

- The angel of Yahweh encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them (Ps 34:7).

- God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea (Ps 46:1-2).

- He permitted no man to oppress them, and He reproved kings for their sakes: “Do not touch My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm” (Ps 105:14-15).

- Yahweh keeps all who love Him (Ps 145:20).

This theme is most powerfully explicated in two famous Psalms: Psalms 91 and 121:

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to Yahweh, “My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!” For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark. You will not be afraid of the terror by night, or of the arrow that flies by day; of the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or of the destruction that lays waste at noon. A thousand may fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand, {But} it shall not approach you. You will only look on with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. For you have made Yahweh, my refuge, {Even} the Most High, your dwelling place. No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent. For He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. They will bear you up in their hands, that you do not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread upon the lion and cobra, the young lion and the serpent you will trample down. “Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him {securely} on high, because he has known My name. He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With a long life I will satisfy him and let him see My salvation” (Ps 91).

I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help {comes} from Yahweh, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Yahweh is your keeper; Yahweh is your shade on your right hand. The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. Yahweh will protect you from all evil; He will keep your soul. Yahweh will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever (Ps 121).

The Psalms also ascribe to the Lord several titles and designations that reflect His role are our Protector. He is our fortress (18:2), rock (18:31), hiding place (32:7), refuge (46:1), stronghold and shield (144:2).

Isaiah also contributes several inspiring texts about God’s protection. Through him, Yahweh gives those returning from exile words of comfort and assurance:

- When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you (Isa 43:2).

- Yahweh will go before you, and the God of Israel {will be} your rear guard (Isa 52:12).

- No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of Yahweh, and their vindication is from Me," declares Yahweh (Isa 54:17).

The New Testament continues the theme of God our Protector, yet focuses more on it in a spiritual sense. Nonetheless, we witness several instances in the earthly ministry of Jesus when He was guarded from attack by enemies (Lk 4:29-30; Jn 10:39). Jesus’ life, in fact, was under threat from the time of His birth, yet the Father delivered Him from Herod’s power (Matt 2). No one could harm Jesus before His appointed time (Jn 7:30, 44). All the armies of heaven were always at His disposal: “Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt 26:53). At the same time, Jesus never put His Father to the test (Lk 4:9-13).

We also recall the instance when Jesus guarded His disciples from a storm at sea. In fact, He wondered at their unbelief (Matt 8:24-27). After His ascension, His disciples continued to enjoy God’s protection. He delivered the Twelve from prison (Acts 5), Peter from death (Acts 12), Paul from the bite of a poisonous snake (Acts 28:3-6) and shipwreck (Acts 27). In the final case, God granted protection to all who travelled with Paul as well. We keep in mind, of course, that in the book of Acts followers of Jesus suffered persecution, sometimes to the point of death (Acts 7, 12). Yet, we understand that the Church is called to share in the sufferings of Christ, that is, persecution for the faith.

In light of our survey above, we can claim that believers can fully rely on God’s protection in a physical sense. Yet, in life experience we do see believers experiencing tragedy. We discuss this difficulty in our chapter on the “Problem of Evil,” in chapter 19 of volume 3. What about God’s promise to guard us spiritually? Does that mean that believers can never fall away? This topic is also covered in volume 3, chapter 18.

**5. Answers to Prayer**

As a loving and caring Father, God answers the prayers of His children. However, the issue of answered prayer is multifactorial and complex. Therefore, we must carefully examine this doctrine and its implications for practical Christian living.

Prayer is a necessity for all. Whenever we meet up with difficulties and challenges in life, the best solution is to appeal to a Higher Power for help, i.e., to our Heavenly Father. The psalmist provides us with a good pattern to follow: “In the day of my trouble I shall call upon You, for You will answer me” (Ps 86:7), and, “In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord” (Ps 77:2). The book of Psalms abounds with examples where the psalmist turns to Yahweh in prayer. This is true for the remainder of the narrative of Scripture as well.

In prayer, people express their deepest feelings to the Lord: all their grief, all their pain. Again, the psalmist is an example: “I cry aloud with my voice to Yahweh; I make supplication with my voice to Yahweh. I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare my trouble before Him” (Ps 142:1-2), and, “Give ear to my prayer, O God; and do not hide Yourself from my supplication.… My heart is in anguish within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror has overwhelmed me” (Ps 55:1-5).

The Lord invites His people to come to Him with their needs and problems. God’s people pray for protection in travel (Ez 8:21-23), for rain (Zech 10:1), for protection from temptation (Lk 22:40), for workers for the harvest (Matt 9:38), for success in ministry (Acts 13:3), and for many other things. Solomon summarizes the limitless scope of God’s care:

If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence, if there is blight or mildew, if there is locust or grasshopper, if their enemies besiege them in the land of their cities, whatever plague or whatever sickness {there is}, whatever prayer or supplication is made by any man or by all Your people Israel, each knowing his own affliction and his own pain, and spreading his hands toward this house, then hear from heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and render to each according to all his ways, whose heart You know for You alone know the hearts of the sons of men (2 Chr 6:28-30).

In Solomon’s experience, we witness one of the most remarkable invitations in Scripture, when the Lord promised him “Ask what {you wish} Me to give you” (1 Kin 3:5). Jesus gave a similar promise to His disciples: “Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be {granted} you” (Mk 11:24; сf. Matt 21:22), and, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you” (Jn 16:23; сf. Jn 14:14). The Gospels also remind us that the Lord knows our needs before we even ask Him (Matt 6:8).

However, it is misguided to think that prayer is appropriate only in times of trouble. In all the generations of God’s people, His worshipers have sought Him in prayer and enjoyed fellowship with Him. Daniel prayed three times a day (Dan 6:10). Anna the prophetess “never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers” (Lk 2:37). The apostles in Jerusalem devoted themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). The elders of the church in Antioch “were ministering to the Lord and fasting” (Acts 13:2). Paul references his prayer life (Rom 1:10; Eph 1:16; Philemon 4). Even the Son of God, Jesus Christ, often secluded Himself for prayer (Lk 5:16). Many use the Lord’s Prayer as a pattern for personal prayer (Matt 6:9-13).

Prayer concerns not only personal needs, but also involves intercession for others. Scripture provides multiple examples of prayer for others: Job for his “friends” (Job 42:8-9), Moses for Israel (Ex 32:30-32) and Miriam (Num 12:11-13), David for his dying son (2 Sam 12:16-17), Nehemiah and Daniel for the remnant of Judah (Neh 1; Dan 9), Jesus for His disciples (Jn 17), the saints for the imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:5), Paul for the churches (Col 1:3), etc. In addition, Christians pray not only for their friends, but also for their enemies (Lk 6:28).

The Bible calls us to support one another in prayer. Jesus gave us the powerful promise, “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven” (Matt 18:19). Paul requested prayer support from the congregations that he founded (2 Cor 1:11; Phil 1:19).

We deeply desire to pray effectively. God promises to answer the prayers of His children, but requires certain conditions. First, prayer must be in accordance with His will (1 Jn 5:14). Consequently, believers need to discern, as far as possible, the will of God in every request they make. The revealed Word of God is our best guide to know the Father’s will. We recall the words of our Lord Jesus: “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (Jn 15:7).

Additionally, God’s Word not only instructs us in God’s ways, but summons us to put them into practice: “…{that} your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you” (Jn 15:16; сf. 1 Jn 3:22). We find the same exhortation in the Old Testament: “The eyes of Yahweh are toward the righteous and His ears are {open} to their cry” (Ps 34:15), and, “Yahweh is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth” (Ps 145:18). It is stated even of God’s Son, “He was heard because of His piety” (Heb 5:7). Scripture promises, “Delight yourself in Yahweh; and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4).

Another irreplaceable element is faith. Those who pray must expect God’s answer to their requests. Scripture abounds in exhortations to faith, of which we will highlight just a few. Jesus taught, “All things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matt 21:22), and, “All things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be {granted} you” (Mk 11:24). John combines the element of faith with praying in God’s will: “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us {in} whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him” (1 Jn 5:14-15). Finally, James reveals how doubt can hinder effective prayer:

But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord (Jam 1:6-7).

The Bible also insists on fervency in prayer (Jam 5:16). Half-hearted prayer will likely go unanswered. The Bible gives us inspiring examples of prayer with feeling: Elijah (1 Kin 18:42-44), Hezekiah (Isa 37:14-20), Nehemiah (Neh 1:4), Mordecai (Est 4:1-3), and others. Once when Jesus prayed, His sweat even became blood (Lk 22:44). Paul equates pray with labor (Col 4:12).

Perseverance is also a necessary component. The Lord told two parables to encourage His disciples to persevere in prayer (Lk 11:5-13; 18:1-8). In another place, Jesus promised, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matt 7:7). The use of the Greek present imperative in this verse indicates perseverance in repeated asking. Bartimaeus displayed tenacity and captured the Lord’s attention as a result (Mk 10:46-48). If the answer to prayer does not come immediately, believers must continue to stand in faith expecting God’s intervention.

Another key component to effective prayer is humility. God “is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5). An angel announced to Daniel that his humility hastened the answer to his prayer (Dan 10:12). Therefore, we value the counsel of Ecclesiastes: “Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God” (Ecc 5:2).

Finally, prayer must be made in the name of Jesus. The Lord Himself insisted on this rule (Jn 16:24). Prayer in Jesus’ name serves as a recognition by the party in prayer that our access to God’s throne is made possible only through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

It is interesting to note that the Bible often narrates examples where those in prayer give God “reasons” why He should answer their prayer, as if they are thereby “convincing” Him to act. For example, in Psalm 74 the psalmist, in asking for Israel’s deliverance, appeals to Yahweh’s reputation among the Gentiles: “Arise, O God, {and} plead Your own cause; remember how the foolish man reproaches You all day long. Do not forget the voice of Your adversaries, the uproar of those who rise against You which ascends continually” (v. 22-23; сf. Num 14:13-16; 2 Kin 19:19). The psalmist also appeals to God’s reputation among believers (Ps 69:6).

Moreover, to further “motivate” God to answer prayer, His people sometimes appeal to the history of Israel and the Lord’s covenant with them: “Remember Your congregation, which You have purchased of old, which You have redeemed to be the tribe of Your inheritance; {and} this Mount Zion, where You have dwelt” (Ps 74:2), and, “They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand” (Neh 1:10). Other appeals are to: God’s faithfulness, “Where are Your former lovingkindnesses, O Lord, which You swore to David in Your faithfulness?” (Ps 89:49; сf. 2 Chr 20:7-12), His love, “Answer me, O Yahweh, for Your lovingkindness is good; according to the greatness of Your compassion, turn to me” (Ps 69:16; сf. Num 14:19), and His righteousness, “O Yahweh my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?” (1 Kin 17:20).

Another factor that can increase effectiveness in prayer is fasting. Even though the Bible gives no direct command to fast, it records many instances where God’s people fasted and received results. Daniel, for example, prayed with fasting before receiving His revelation of the coming of Messiah (Dan 9). Esther called for a three day fast that God would grant her favor before the king (Est 4:16). Jehoshaphat along with all Israel sought the Lord in prayer and fasting when threatened by Moab and Ammon (2 Chr 20).

Fasting was a New Testament practice as well. Jesus Himself fasted for forty days before His temptation in the wilderness (Lk 4:2). Leaders of the church in Antioch prayed and fasted before they commissioned Paul and Barnabas on their mission (Acts 13:3). In 1 Corinthians 7:5, Paul recommended a temporary abstinence from marital relations as a type of fast.

Two final “ingredients” for effective prayer, which are no longer practiced among God’s people, are offering sacrifices and making vows. The Old Testament records several instances where offering a sacrifice contributed to effectiveness in prayer (e.g. 1 Sam 10:8; 2 Sam 24:25). However, making sacrifices is inappropriate for Christ’s Church. The singular sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient. Concerning vows, we will address that question in chapter 10 of volume 5.

As we have seen, some factors may aid effective prayer, but other factors may hinder it. Sin is the main hindrance: “If I regard wickedness in my heart, Yahweh will not hear” (Ps 66:18). Isaiah declares the same: “So when you spread out your hands {in prayer,} I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood” (Isa 1:15).[[92]](#footnote-92)

Demonic forces can delay answers to prayer. Such was the case with Daniel, who waited for 21 days while angels battled (Dan 10:12-14). Lack of respect for God (Mal 1:8-9) or one’s wife (1 Pet 3:7) can also present a problem. Jesus specifically directed His followers to forgive others when praying (Mk 10:25; сf. 1 Tim 2:8). In a practical sense, fatigue can interfere with prayer, as when the disciples fell asleep instead of praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk 22:45).

Jesus gave further instruction about prayer in His Sermon on the Mount – do not pray for show (Matt 6:5-6) or pray with meaningless repetition (Matt 6:7).

The biblical testimony and the experience of God’s people demonstrates that God not only promises to answer prayer, but actually does answer. He answered the request of Abraham’s servant and led him to Rebecca (Gen 24). He had mercy on rebellious Israel thanks to Moses’ prayer (Num 11:2-3). The Lord answered Hezekiah’s prayer for healing (2 Kin 19:20). In answer to prayer, He blessed Zechariah and Elizabeth with a child (Lk 1:13). We can cite many other examples.

Although we often question why God does not always answer quickly (Ps 60, 88), those who persevere prove Him faithful. God does not only answer prayer, He gives peace to our hearts and minds when we make known our requests to Him (Phil 4:6-7).

Even though the Bible gives no specific instruction on bodily position in prayer, it will interest us to note how people in the Bible prayed. Sometimes they stand (1 Kin 8:22) and sometimes they kneel (1 Kin 8:54; Dan 6:10; Eph 3:14). They may lift their hands (1 Kin 8:38, 54; Ps 143:6; 1 Tim 2:8) and lift their eyes to heaven (Mk 6:31; 7:34). Concerning the time to pray, the psalmist preferred morning prayer (Ps 5:3; 88:13). Daniel prayed three times a day (Dan 6:10). Peter and John went to the temple at the hour of prayer (Acts 3:1).

To whom should we pray? In general, the Bible instructs us to pray to God the Father in the name of Jesus Christ (Jn 16:23). However, we also see indications of prayer to Jesus Himself (Acts 7:59; 2 Cor 12:8-9).[[93]](#footnote-93) A key passage here is John 14:13-14: “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do {it}.”

Finally, along with making requests to the Father, it is always appropriate to give thanks. The Bible both gives us specific instruction in this regard, and presents concrete examples of this behavior. Again, we appeal to Daniel: “He continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God” (Dan 6:10) and Paul: “(I) do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention {of you} in my prayers” (Eph 1:16).

We will return to the topic of prayer in volume 5 of this series.

**6. The Inheritance of the Saints**

As children of God, believers in Jesus can expect to receive an inheritance. The Greek word used to describe this derives from the root κληρόω(*kleroo*) and appears in the biblical text in various forms. The inheritance is granted not only to God’s only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ (Matt 21:38; Heb 1:2), but also to those who through Him have been adopted into the family of God (Gal 4:7; Rom 8:17; Eph 1:11).[[94]](#footnote-94)

We can further clarify this theme. First, we must recognize that the believers’ inheritance is not based on their personal merit, but on God’s grace (Gal 3:18; 4:30; Heb 6:12; 9:15-17). In spite of the fact that believers are God’s children and consequently heirs of God, this in no may means that God “owes” them something. All that we receive from God comes by grace.

Second, the Scriptures teach that Christians enter into their full inheritance only after the resurrection from the dead (1 Cor 15:50). Part of our inheritance, in fact, is a glorified body. Third, unlike Hebrew and Ancient Near Eastern traditions, both men and women are heirs (1 Pet 3:7). Lastly, God’s Word warns that one can forfeit the inheritance by returning to a life of sin (Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Eph 5:5; Acts 20:32; Col 3:24).

Finally, although the Bible does not give a precise description of what this inheritance consists of, we know that it is rich and glorious (Eph 1:18). Paul makes the amazing statement, “The world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you” (1 Cor 3:22).[[95]](#footnote-95) All of creation “waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom 8:19).[[96]](#footnote-96)

Our inheritance is conceptually linked to the ideas of “life,” “eternal life,” and “salvation.” (1 Pet 1:4; 3:7, 9; Rev 21:6; Matt 19:29; Mk 10:17; Lk 10:25; 18:18; Eph 1:14). These ideas are therefore synonymous. In addition, the inheritance is also associated with the Kingdom (Rom 4:13; Matt 25:34; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50). The Bible reveals that believers will reign with Christ. God’s children are destined to “inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5).

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21. The metaphor of God as Father extends beyond its application to people. He is the “Father of lights,” i.e., its source (Jam 1:17). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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27. Blekkink, p. 30-32; Lidgett, p. 317; Conn, p. 33-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Conn, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., p. 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The best manuscripts (*Р*75 א A B C) lack the word “you (all),” which one sees in the King James Version (see Metzger B. M. A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. – 2nd ed. – London; New York: United Bible Societies. – P. 536). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
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49. Cameron, p. 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Blekkink, p. 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Cameron, p. 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
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53. Cameron, p. 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
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55. Davis, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Stein, p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
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79. Robison, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Frost, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. However, as noted in chapter 8 of volume 2, God knew from the beginning that Israel (and humanity in general) would not be able to keep the Law and, in the end, it would serve not as a method of spiritual training, but as a cause for accusation. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
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83. Frost, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
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85. Robison, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
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87. Conn, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid., p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Robison, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
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