

On Being Sons and Daughters of God

Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17

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Some people struggle with deep disturbing doubts about their salvation. They fear that when they die their soul will experience eternal punishment in hell.

Most of you know that I am an advocate for doubts. I have said on various occasions that some doubts are good and can serve as a springboard into truth. People once believed that the earth was flat, and sailors were advised to be careful so they didn't sail off the edge of the earth. We had to doubt that belief before we could learn the truth. That's good doubt. People once believed that it was acceptable to own human slaves, and since slaves didn't really have a soul they could be treated in inhumane ways. We had to doubt that belief before we could learn the truth. That's good doubt.

That's not the kind of doubt I'm talking about today. I'm talking about a more disturbing doubt, where one questions his or her acceptability to God. Some are plagued by doubts of their worthiness to be a Christian. They doubt whether God could really love and accept them. They may have been baptized. They may have said the prescribed prayers. Sometimes they even attend church services regularly. But deep within they have this troubling, disturbing doubt: am I *really* a son or daughter of God?

My experience has been that people who struggle with these doubts often are like me. They grew up in a very conservative, highly evangelistic church where the preachers were so eager to get people "saved" that they used mostly negative motivators. We were dangled over the hell fires every Sunday. Brimstone fell upon our shoulders. While people may have said that "God is love," the real picture of God that developed was of an angry God, a fire-breathing and vengeful God. And the reason God was so angry was that I was a sinner. It didn't matter that I was only fifteen years old and that I was a perfectly normal fifteen year old. My sins, petty though they may have been, had so offended God that God was planning an anguishing judgment for me and others like me. That's the message I grew up with.

Did anyone else here grow up with that message?

I was sitting beside a fellow who understood that message in a theology class during my seminary days. Dr. Dale Moody was the professor, and what a great professor he was. He was somewhat controversial, and students regularly challenged him. Of course, he loved it. He relished a challenge. He would take out his Greek New Testament and beat them with it. So I never asked a question.

One day a fellow raised his hand and asked respectfully, “Dr. Moody, how can someone be sure of his salvation?”

I think Dr. Moody recognized right away that this was more of a cry for help than it was a question. It was like Dr. Moody tuned out the rest of the class, and it became him and this student in a private conversation.

Dr. Moody took off his large black glasses and repeated the question, “How can we be sure of our salvation?” Then he put his glass back on and said, “Well, Romans 8. Open your Bible and read it with me.”

We all opened our Bibles. He started with verse twelve and read through verse sixteen. In my study Bible, which is in my office, I underlined as he read it and then I placed a star beside the verse he emphasized. It was verse sixteen. Here are verses fifteen and sixteen:

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Dr. Moody explained that the word “Abba” is Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, and was a term of endearment for father. Jesus used it on other occasions. Then he looked directly at the student who had asked the question and said, “Son, if you can cry out to God and call God “Abba! Father!” and genuinely mean it, then God’s Spirit will bear witness with your spirit that *you are a child of God.*”

Abba! Father! And really mean it. Let it rise from the depths of your soul. If we do that, Romans 8 says that we are adopted by God—adopted! We become God’s son or daughter and thus joint heirs with Christ.

That is the God I finally found, and I pray that you will too. If you are troubled by this doubt, release it to God today. As we come to the table of our Lord, release that doubt and cry, “Abba! Father!” Let it rise genuinely from the depths of our heart, and then trust that you have been adopted by a loving Father. You are a son or daughter of God.

Prayer of Confession

Assurance of Pardon