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The Cosmic Significance of Adoption: What It Means for Us and for Orphans

Dan Cruver

Together for Adoption

Introduction: The Global Orphan Crisis

Allow me to overwhelm you with some staggering numbers.

There are 143 million orphaned and vulnerable children in our world. If all of these children were moved to the country of Mexico, Mexico's population would more than double, growing from 108,700,000 to 251,700,000.

There are approximately 47.5 million orphaned and vulnerable children in Sub-Saharan Africa.

There are approximately 5.9 million orphaned and vulnerable children in Middle East and North Africa.

There are approximately 37.4 million orphaned and vulnerable children in South Asia.

30.1 million orphaned and vulnerable children live in East Asia and Pacific.

9.4 million orphaned and vulnerable children live in Latin America and the Caribbean..

There are as many orphaned and vulnerable children living in Ethiopia as there are people in greater NYC.

Almost 1.5 million children live in public care in Central and Eastern Europe.

That's our world.

What about the United States?

More than 800,000 children pass through our country's foster care system each year. There are over 500,000 children in our foster care system right now. 129,000 of those children are waiting to be adopted right now. That's how many people live in the capitol of South Carolina.

Approximately, 25,000 children age out of the foster care system each year, many with no support system and little to no life skills. There are currently over 5,400 children in South Carolina's foster care system. Over 1,500 of them are waiting to be adopted. So far this year only a couple hundred of them have been permanently placed in homes.

This brings us to this question: How many total children are adopted each year? Between 118,000 and 127,000 children have been adopted every year since 1987. More than 50 percent of all adoptions are handled by public agencies or come from countries outside the United States. More than one-third of Americans have seriously considered adopting, but no more than 2 percent have actually adopted. Only 4 percent of families with children (1.7 million households) contain adopted children.

With this many orphans in the United States and in the world, the church has a monumental task before it if it is to practice true religion. James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." The church has its work cut out for it.

Christianity's Vertical to Horizontal Movement

Have you ever thought about Christianity's unique vertical to horizontal movement? Since Christianity's vertical to horizontal movement is ultimately what will mobilize the church to address the global orphan crisis, let's take a few moments to consider it.

The uniqueness of Christianity's *vertical* movement is that it is never first man responding to God, it is always *first* God coming down to man in grace. Nor does Christianity's *horizontal* movement from man to man (i.e., love your neighbor as yourself) precede its vertical movement from God to man. In other words, we move horizontally as Christians because God first moved vertically to us in grace.

Let me give you a few of examples.

Example one: love moved vertically before it ever moved horizontally. Love moved from God to man before it ever moved from man to man. But it's not enough merely to say that love moves vertically from God to man before it moves horizontally from man to man. Scripture teaches that we love horizontally because God first loved us vertically. In the words of John, "We love because he (God) first loved us" (1 John 4:19). So, Christianity has an essential vertical to horizontal movement. And without it, without this vertical movement of God's love for us, there is no Christianity.

Example two: forgiveness is first vertical before it's horizontal. Paul commanded the Ephesian church to forgive one another even as God in Christ had forgiven them. Vertical forgiveness — God's forgiving of us in Christ — precedes *and* enables horizontal forgiveness: Christians forgiving Christians. So to borrow John's words from 1 John 4:19, "We forgive because God first forgave us."

Example three: in Romans 15, the Christians in Rome are commanded to welcome one another even as Christ already welcomed them (v. 7). So once again we see there is a clear horizontal and vertical movement. We welcome one another horizontally as believers, Paul says, because we have first been welcomed vertically. Christ has first welcomed us, and as a result, we are enabled to welcome one another within the household of faith.

Vertical to Horizontal Adoption?

Christianity has a unique vertical to horizontal movement and without this movement Christianity ceases to be Christianity. So the question is this, since Christianity has this unique vertical to horizontal movement, how does its vertical to horizontal movement relate to adoption and orphan care?

We know how it relates to love: God first loved us so that we can express and extend the same kind of love to others.

We know how it relates to forgiveness: God first forgave us in Christ so that we can horizontally extend that forgiveness to others.

We know how it relates to welcoming kindness: God first welcomed us in Christ so that we as believers can move out horizontally and welcome each other.

So how does this vertical to horizontal movement relate to adoption and orphan care? Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 1:3-5.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love. Having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to himself according to the good pleasure of his will.”

Scripture leaves no doubt here: before the dawning of human history, before the earth was created, before the universe came into existence by the spoken word of God, God marked us out for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. Get this: adoption existed in the mind of God an eternity before it ever occurred to man to adopt. Vertical adoption precedes *all of human history*. Adoption existed vertically before it ever existed horizontally. Man did not invent adoption. God did.

Therefore, the way we think about adoption horizontally should be shaped by Scripture’s teaching on vertical adoption. How we think about bringing orphans into our families should be influenced and determined by how we understand what God has done vertically in adoption. Our adoption of orphaned children should be informed by what God has done to bring us into his household.

The Question

Unfortunately, I don’t think that vertical adoption really shapes the way we think about earthly adoption, at least not the way it should. Let me give you an example from my own family’s experience. My wife and I are caucasian—always have been, always will be. Shortly after we adopted our second black child, a couple from our church came over to us after corporate worship to congratulate us. I was holding the youngest of our two boys while the other one was holding on to my leg.

After talking about the boys for a minute or two, the wife pauses, looks me in the eyes and says, “Have you and your wife determined whether or not you are going to tell your boys that they were adopted?”

It was one of those moments when everything felt like it was moving in slowmotion, except for my mind. Questions like “How do I handle this? Is she joking? Is she not joking? Is she serious? Is she not serious?” rushed through my mind in a split second. I stood there waiting for a smirk to appear on her face—the kind of smirk that says, “Ha! I gottcha, didn’t I?” No such smirk came. But God was gracious to me (and to her!) in that moment. I simply said, “Yes, we plan on telling our boys that they entered our family through adoption.”

Now, here’s why I tell that story. If we are thinking *first* vertically about adoption, we won’t ask a question like that—even of a family that adopts within their same ethnicity.

Why not? Because God does not hide our adoption from us! As a matter of fact, Paul tells us that before human history even began, before there was an earth, before there was a universe, God marked us out for adoption. Paul thinks it is important enough to tell us that before the beginning of time God decided to bring us into his family, into his household through adoption. Now if *that* reality is primary in our thinking when we hear the word “adoption,” we will first think vertically before we think horizontally about adoption.

As I have already argued, Christianity has a unique vertical to horizontal movement. The vertical realities of Christianity (i.e., God’s love, forgiveness, welcoming kindness, adopting love, etc) should determine how we think about life horizontally. Vertical adoption, then, should influence how we think about and practice horizontal adoption.

Adoption’s Happy Ending

The word “adoption” only occurs five times in all of Scripture, and it’s only found in the writings of Paul. But here’s what’s interesting about the five occurrences of the word “adoption” in Paul’s epistles. If you look at them together, you can see that they are easily arranged chronologically. Paul’s references to adoption actually serve as markers along the entire timeline of story of redemption. So that, as we saw in Ephesians 1, not only does adoption actually precede human history, it also actually brings the story of redemption to its consummation. Adoption plays a central role at the climax of redemption’s story. Scripture presents adoption as our happy ending. Take a look at Romans 8:23.

“And not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruit of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

Not only is adoption something that happened to us in the past when we first believed in Christ, but Paul says it’s also something that will happen to us in the future. There is an “already, not yet” thing going on here.

So what’s the “not yet” aspect of our adoption that Paul’s is referring to in Romans 8:23? I’ve found it helpful to think of it as the finalization of our adoption. Yes, we have already been adopted, but we are still awaiting the finalization of our adoption. When we brought our two boys into our household, they were our children through adoption. But there came a day when we went before the court, and their adoption was finalized. I think that’s a helpful way to think about what’s going on in Romans 8:23. We have been adopted and yet we are awaiting the finalization of our adoption.

Now, with all of this in mind, let’s answer three questions: (1) What will the finalization of our adoption look like? (2) What’s Jesus got to do with it? (3) What’s the finalization of our adoption have to do with the global orphan crisis?

What will the finalization of our adoption look like?

Let’s take a closer look at Romans 8:23. Just several verses earlier Paul writes, “For I consider that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:18-19). Do you see what Paul does here? He personifies creation, all of it, and says that it is eagerly awaiting something: *the revealing of the sons of God*.

But what exactly is “the revealing of the sons of God for which creation eagerly awaits”? It is, according to verse 23, the finalization of adoption as sons. It’s the day our bodies are redeemed or glorified. And as we shall see, that future day has everything to do with mobilizing the church for orphan care and adoption ministry now.

Hints from the Old Testament

Have you ever noticed that there is a past Old Testament event that illumines what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:23? It’s actually an event that sets this future aspect of our adoption firmly within the larger context of redemption’s story.

The word “redemption” is hint number one of this past event that illumines what is taking place in Romans 8:23. Back in the first century, anyone familiar with the Bible’s story would have immediately thought “Exodus” upon hearing the word “redemption.” Their minds would have recalled what God did to redeem Israel out of Egyptian bondage. This Exodus was *the* redemptive event within Old Testament times.

In Romans 8:23, Paul’s telling us that there is a *future* Exodus, and it has everything to do with the finalization of our adoption. It has everything to do with the transformation of our bodies. That’s the first hint.

The second hint is found Romans 8:14-15. Let’s see if you can hear Exodus-echoes from the text itself: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” God leads his sons.

Verse 15 continues, “For you did not receive the spirit of (notice this next word) bondage again to fear, but you received the spirit of adoption, whereby you cry ‘Abba, Father.’” Paul’s point in these two verses is that God leads his sons out of bondage. He leads his children out of slavery.

Think of how Israel’s Exodus unfolded: God commands Moses to say to Pharaoh, “Israel is my firstborn son. Let my son go that he may serve me, that he may worship me” (Exodus 5:1). And then after ten plagues, God delivers Israel, His firstborn son, out of Egypt.

What does God do next? He leads His sons out of slavery by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God is the God who delivered Israel in order to lead them out of slavery into the freedom of worship. He’s also the God who still leads His sons out of bondage into freedom by the Spirit.

Both of these hints tell us that *the* Old Testament event that is behind what Paul is talking about in Romans 8:23 is the Exodus. The biblical story that stands behind this text is what God did to deliver Israel out of Egypt. There is a strong connection between what God did back then, and what God’s going to do in the future when he finalizes our adoption.

This connection tells us that what God did for Israel back then foreshadowed what God did in Jesus through his death and resurrection, and what He will do yet through Jesus in the future. God is the God who leads out of slavery. God is the God who leads out of bondage.

One day God will free His children, all of us, from our bondage to decay. When this happens, the created world “will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). The created world will be renewed.

Have you ever thought about how the truth of Romans 8 should inform our understanding of “visiting orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27)? The story of the Bible is the story of God visiting *us* in our affliction — like He visited Israel in its affliction (Exodus 4:31) — in order to deliver us from it.

If any group of people should be passionate about visiting orphans in *their* affliction in order to deliver them from it, it should be the children of God. There is no other group of people that should be more easily mobilized to care for orphans. Period. *Visiting orphans in their distress mirrors what God has done for us in ours.*

This is one reason why the church needs to rehearse and rejoice in the story of redemption over and over again. Not only is redemption the Grand Story of the universe, it is also our story and it is what will move us out in mission to visit orphans in their affliction.

Cosmic Freedom

As we’ve just seen, the finalization of our adoption is an Exodus—an incredibly massive, cosmic Exodus. But our Exodus is not just about us. It’s much bigger than that. Yes, it begins with us, and we trigger what happens after it, but it’s not just about us.

Look back at Romans 8:19-21. “For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.” Why? Why is creation eagerly waiting for us to be revealed? Verse 20 tells us, “For the creation was (listen to the language again) subjected to futility. Not willingly but because of him who subjected it in hope. Because the creation itself (I love this!) also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty (the glorious freedom!) of the children of God.”

Our adoption — the finalization of our adoption — has cosmic significance! Creation is beautiful and God intended that mankind steward it for his glory, but because of sin creation is also profoundly dangerous. Tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes. But do you know what Paul is saying here? Every time the plates in the earth shift and the ground opens up, every time buildings collapse and people are crushed by falling debris, do you know what creation is doing in those horrific moments? It is groaning!

All of creation is eagerly awaiting for the finalization of *our* adoption, because when that happens, creation itself, which has been subjected to futility just as Israel had been in Egypt, will be set free to be what God has always intended it to be. And it’s all triggered by the finalization of *our* adoption. So let me ask you this question, how significant is vertical adoption? How important is vertical adoption? It has cosmic significance. Its importance is incalculable.

The Point of It All

Now let me ask another question, really two. What was the ultimate point of the Exodus in the Old Testament? Our answer to this question will tell us what the ultimate point of our future Exodus, the one which creation will also share in.

Let's quickly rehearse the events of the first Exodus: God delivers Israel from Egypt, they cross the Red Sea, God conquers and slays the Egyptian army. Then we have in Exodus 15, the Song of Moses, which the people of Israel sang together in celebration of what God had done.

Do you know what the climax of that song is? It's found in verse 17, "You, God, will bring them in and plant them in the mountain of your inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which you have made for your own dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established."

What is verse 17 talking about? The "mountain of God's inheritance," His own dwelling place, is the Promise Land. God delivered His people out of Egypt in order that He might bring them into the land where His presence will be made known and enjoyed. That was the point of the Exodus. In this land that was flowing with milk and honey—where the cursed seemed to be reversed—God would give Israel His special presence.

And this is the ultimate point of the *cosmic* Exodus too! Biblical scholar Michael Goheen says that life for Israel in the promised land was "to be an emblem of the full restoration of God's presence within the whole creation" (*The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 72).

So, when God brought Israel into the Promised Land in order that He might dwell with them, it was to be an emblem of the future day when God's presence would fill the entire creation. The universe was designed, as another scholar writes, "to be filled, flooded, drenched in God as a chalice is beautiful because of what we know it is designed to contain or as a violin is beautiful because we know the music of which it is capable. God intends to flood the universe with his presence as though the universe, the entire cosmos, was designed as a receptacle for his love" (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 102) And this great filling of the universe with the all-satisfying presence of God will be triggered by the finalization of our adoption as sons!

What's Jesus got to do with it?

Where is Jesus in all this? What exactly did Jesus do to give us the hope of such an unfathomable future? Great question!

We were created to commune with God, to know and be known by God. That's why we were placed on this earth. But what happened? The fall. Man rebelled against the fatherly love and care of God and suddenly everything changed. We became, as Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1-3, "sons of disobedience," "children of wrath."

In his genealogy of Jesus, Luke says that Adam was a "son of God" (Luke 3:38). Adam was a little "s" son in that he was created in the image of God to enjoy God's fatherly love and care on this earth. But Adam rebelled. And as a result, his sonship was lost. The image of God in man was defaced. And now man is a son of disobedience, a child of wrath.

So here's the big question: how is the hope of our glorious future as God's sons through adoption even possible? How is it possible that God can take "children of wrath" and give them an unbelievable future on a renewed earth? What has God done to give us this hope that is laid out for us in Romans 8:23?

Paul's amazing answer is given to us in another adoption text. Galatians 4:4 says, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son." Who is this Son that he sent forth? God sent the Son with whom he enjoyed eternal love and communion for all of eternity past.

For all eternity the Father poured out his infinite love upon his Son and His Son joyfully received that love; and the Son eternally poured out his love upon the Father. Forever and ever in eternity past, the Father and the Son enjoyed perfect unending fellowship and communion and love. It's this God who sent his Son on a mission into this fallen world.

And what was that mission? Paul says, "God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, (so that the eternal Son became the incarnate Son) born under the law." The law under which the Son became incarnate meant condemnation for us. As Paul says earlier, this law 'held us in bondage.' It could not give us life. It could not quicken us. Rather, it puts us to death because of our sin.

But God sent His Son, His eternal Son, who became the incarnate Son without ceasing to be the eternal Son, and he lived his life under the law in order to fulfill it. To paraphrase what Paul says in Galatians 3, "The curse of the law was placed upon his shoulders."

At the cross this One who in the Garden of Gethsemane cried out, "Abba, Father, remove this cup from me," willingly submitted to the will of the Father on our behalf and went to the cross. At the cross *this* Son cried out, not 'Abba, Father,' but "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" He experienced at the cross what we sons of disobedience, children of wrath deserve.

Why did Jesus do that? Why did God send forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem us? (There's the word "redemption" again.) Why did he do this? Paul tell us in verse 5: "that we might receive adoption as sons." Jesus bore the curse of the law that we might be brought into the household of God to share in the love that has existed between the Father and the Son for all of eternity. We who by nature are sons of disobedience, we who by nature are objects of God's wrath, are brought in to share in this amazing love which will one day fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Do you remember what happened on the day of resurrection? Mary Magdalene runs to the tomb looking for the body of Jesus. When she sees the the tomb is empty, she weeps. Jesus then approaches her, but she doesn't know that it's him.

When she finally realizes that it's Jesus, she grabs him. Do you remember what Jesus says to her? "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and to your Father'" (John 20:17).

Do you know the significance of Jesus' words? He accomplished redemption! He took the curse of the law upon his own shoulders and was forsaken by his Father so that we might receive adoption as sons! And on the day of his resurrection Jesus says to Mary, "Go to my brothers and tell them I'm ascending to my Father and *your* Father." *Your* Father! Mission accomplished!

What's the finalization of our adoption have to do with the global orphan crisis?

Now remember, Christianity has this amazing vertical to horizontal movement. As a result, Christians should see a vertical to horizontal movement with adoption.

Let me be clear, though: We are *not* saying that God calls every Christian couple to adopt. He simply doesn't. But what we are saying is that God has called His people, He's called the church to visit orphans in their affliction and distress.

So, how should our vertical adoption influence how we view orphan care? How should it influence how we practice or think about horizontal adoption (i.e., couples bringing children into their family)?

Here is what I know: I was once a stranger outside the covenants of promise (Ephesians 2:12). I was once without God and without hope in this world. But God brought me near by the blood of Jesus and placed me in his household (Ephesians 2:13). That's not all: not only has God placed us in His household as His dear children, He's also going to give us a restored creation as our home! That means that our eternal home will be a renewed earth where God's presence is known and enjoyed and where there is no more suffering, no more distress, no more affliction!

If there is a people on the face of the earth who should be passionate about caring for orphans in their affliction, it is those whom God has visited in their own misery. He has given us a remarkable gift by sending his own Son into the world to redeem us that we might receive adoption as sons (and everything else that comes with it). If there is anyone who should care for orphans in their affliction, it will be God's children, God's sons through adoption.

Don't forget this either! Our efforts to visit orphans in their affliction are an emblem of the future day when God will finally and completely deliver us from the suffering of this present age and make all things new!

At the beginning of this sermon, I said that Christianity has a unique vertical to horizontal movement. What God calls us to do, therefore, is to know what it means to be brought into His family through adoption, to understand afresh that our Father is a Father of the fatherless (Psalm 68:5), and then to move out in mission to visit orphans in their distress.

Certainly, if any group of people would joyfully give themselves to care for orphans, it would be those whom God has adopted. Some of us are called to adopt children ourselves, others to come alongside adoptive families in different ways, and still others to care for orphans by supplying their physical needs in hope that there will be families who will bring them in. Why are we to do things like this? Because Christianity has an essential vertical to horizontal movement.