

Redeemed, adopted, heirs (Galatians 4:1–7)

The drift to legalism was driven in the Galatian churches by false brethren, but is ever-present, even today. Self-effort does not make us right before God, nor keep us right before God. Being “under law” is “being under a curse,” “being held captive” and “imprisoned,” and “being under a “child-guardian.” Now the apostle Paul calls it “being slaves” or “in bondage.” The choice between being under the law on the one hand or faith alone in Christ alone on the other hand is a choice between being slaves or being sons and heirs of God.

I. *Being under the law means being slaves (4:1–3).*

1. *Paul’s analogy* (vv. 1–2): In the culture, an under-age child or a “minor”, though he would one-day inherit from his father, had no authority. Both his person and estate was under the care of “guardians and managers” making the child no better than a slave.
2. *The application* (v. 3): This Paul says is the way “we were” (verse 3).
 - a. By “we” Paul means Christians (cf. v. 5). Although he could mean both Jewish and Gentile Christians, “we Jewish believers” would explain the switch to “you” in v. 6, it addresses better the problem of the Judaizers, and it fits the context and opening analogy best. Jewish believers before Christ were like under-aged children who have been promised an inheritance, but not yet received it.
 - b. The child being under “guardians and managers” illustrates being “enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.” This challenging phrase is simply “the elements of the world” (KJV), but which developed from the letters of the alphabet to basic instructions or physical elements or the spiritual forces of pagan belief behind those elements. If “we” (vv. 3–5) refers to Jewish believers, then this phrase is best understood as a reference to the Mosaic Law with its regulations on how to live in this world, such as dietary and ritual laws. Hebrews 9:10 calls them “regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.” Such regulations were not useless, but they were not freeing. According to Hebrews those who were under that system, though living by faith, were still waiting for the promised inheritance.

II. *Being under grace means being sons and heirs (4:4–7).*

Two specific acts of God changed the status of O.T. believers as well as providing the same status for Gentile believers.

1. *God sent His Son.*

- a. “When the fullness of time had come”: the time as set by the Father was fulfilled (cf. Mark 1:14–15), and humanly speaking many things favored the spread of Christianity.
- b. “God sent forth His Son”: His coming was a purposeful, divinely planned event and this statement indicates the pre-existence of Christ and points to His deity (i.e., “Son”).
- c. “Born of a woman”: This is neither a denial of nor proof-text for the virgin birth, but rather an affirmation of the humanity of Jesus Christ.
- d. “Born under the law”: Christ submitted to the demands of the law, obeying them perfectly, fulfilling its obligations, and ultimately bearing the law’s curse for believers.
- e. “To redeem those who were under the law”: Christ’s deity and sinless humanity were necessary for His death to pay the redemption price of those enslaved under the law. If believing Jews had been bought out of the system of slavery, certainly Gentiles would not be obligated to enter that slavery.
- f. “So that we might receive adoption as sons”: Not only were believers freed from slavery, they were adopted as sons of God, those who had a new legal standing with the Father. This was God’s intent from the beginning (Ephesians 1:3–5).

2. *God sent the Spirit of His Son into the hearts of believers.*

- a. This is true for every child of God. The Gentile believers of Galatia were sons of God through faith in Christ (3:26) and they along with all true believers today have the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:9). There are not two classes of Christians, those with and those without the Spirit.
- b. The presence of the Spirit crying “Abba, Father”, is evidence of the changed relationship which the believer has with God. Coming to the Father confidently without fear should characterize the believer. Cf. Romans 8:15–16.
- c. Being true sons also means being heirs. Though the full inheritance is yet future, believers have a present guarantee and down payment in the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13–14; cf. 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5). This is true for every, individual, true believer.

Law-keeping does not earn merit, it enslaves. With the Spirit, believers have a taste of the future inheritance. Especially in prayer the believer can enjoy the relationship to God as heavenly Father. Let that relationship grant perspective in troubling times.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- Explain the reason that being “under law” is being in bondage.
- What obligation(s) may exist for those who have been redeemed? Why?
- What are the similarities and differences between human adoptions and God’s adoption of believers?
- How can we counter our imperfect father models to present a right picture of God’s fatherhood?