

Matthew 19:27–30 (CEB)

²⁷ Then Peter replied, “Look, we’ve left everything and followed you. What will we have?”

²⁸ Jesus said to them, “I assure you who have followed me that, when everything is made new, when the Human One sits on his magnificent throne, you also will sit on twelve thrones overseeing the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And all who have left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or farms because of my name will receive one hundred times more and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first.

Galatians 3:23–4:6 (CEB)

²³ Before faith came, we were guarded under the Law, locked up until faith that was coming would be revealed, ²⁴ so that the Law became our custodian until Christ so that we might be made righteous by faith.

²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian.

²⁶ You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.

¹ I’m saying that as long as the heirs are minors, they are no different from slaves, though they really are the owners of everything. ² However, they are placed under trustees and guardians until the date set by the parents. ³ In the same way, when we were minors, we were also enslaved by this world’s system. ⁴ But when the fulfillment of the time came, God sent his Son, born through a woman, and born under the Law. ⁵ This was so he could redeem those under the Law so that we could be adopted. ⁶ Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” ⁷ Therefore, you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter, and if you are his child, then you are also an heir through God.

What a promise. God’s children and heirs.

Last week, we talked about our tendency to *take* and our failure to grasp the enormity of God’s grace. It is so easy to see what I have as being *mine*, when the truth is that it is all God’s gift. Easy to say . . . not so easy to embrace. For across the board, it is exceedingly hard for us to internalize what we proclaim, preach, and teach about God. We can say the words but to truly put them into practice is a very different thing.

Heirs of the inheritance

Paul confronts this problem in his letters to communities of believers. It is as if he grabs them by their lapels as he tries to help them truly know who they are and whose they are. These new Christians (after all, Christianity was all new at the time) don’t really grasp the work that God has done in them. Paul urges them to remember the gifts that God bestowed on them, beginning with the Holy Spirit. Paul’s message to them is, “You are new creations; now act like it!”

In today’s passage from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he uses the analogy of minors, heirs, and inheritance to make his point. In chapter 3 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses two images to talk about the law and its place prior to Jesus. First, he depicts the law as a jailor, who locked up the prisoners and kept guard over them until Jesus came to liberate them. Paul also pictures the law as a custodian, who took care of God’s children, showed them how to live, and disciplined them.¹ Similar to a nanny.

¹ From C.B. Cousar’s commentary on Galatians in the *Interpretation* series.

Moving into chapter 4, Paul mixes two metaphors. Paul begins with the image of an heir. Then, as now, fathers would set up estates for their children and appoint guardians or trustees who would control the estate until the children had come of age. Unlike today, under Roman law children with a guardian had the legal status of a slave. In Paul's metaphor, it is God the Father who has set up the estate. The law is the guardian. It is all humanity who has lived as minors, as slaves even, under the guardianship of the law², bound to the "elemental spirits of the earth" (v. 3).

But . . . in an act of cosmic significance, God has intervened . . . the time has been fulfilled (Mark 1:14) . . . the minors have become of age . . . the slaves have been freed. How could this be? Paul explains to the Galatians that God has sent his own son -- quite human (born of a woman) and quite Jewish (born under the law) -- who has "redeemed"³ humanity, so that everyone might be adopted as God's children. Here, Paul introduces his second metaphor, that of adoption. This becomes a little clearer when we remember that Paul is writing to Christians who had not been Jewish; the adoption language would have been especially meaningful for them -- as it is for us. Jewish-Christians would have seen themselves as having received their inheritance by birth. But Paul makes clear that Gentile-Christians could claim adoption into God's family . . . from a slave to a child (adopted or otherwise) to an heir. Whether born a son or adopted as a son, Paul sees no distinction before God. By sending his Son to free us from our prison, God has brought both Jew and Gentile into his newly-created family.

Experiencing Our Adoption

This "legal" adoption is not the end of Paul's story. God sent his Holy Spirit to us as the sign and pledge of our adoption into God's family. As Cousar writes, "Just as an orphan taken into the home of foster parents may initially mistrust or at least wonder about the reception given by the new parents and may require some gesture to get over the feelings of being an outsider, so God's adopted children move about in fear until the Spirit operates at a deep level 'in our hearts' to corroborate not once by repeatedly the reality of the Father's love." Clearly, we are to understand and find great joy in the intimate relationship we enjoy with God.

Yes, God's children and heirs

So . . . we *are* in direct relationship with God. We *are* dressed in the adult wardrobe of faith. We *are* in Christ's family. We *are* the descendants of Abraham. We *are* the adult heirs of God and the inheritance due God's heirs is ours. John Stott helps us to understand the implications of being heirs to the promise made to Abraham.⁴

We have seen that in Christ we belong to God and to each other. In Christ we also belong to Abraham. We take our place in the noble historical succession of faith, whose outstanding representatives are listed in Hebrews 11. No longer do we feel ourselves to be waifs and strays, without any significance in history, or bits of useless flotsam drifting on the tide of time. Instead, we find our place in the unfolding purpose of God. We are the spiritual seed of our father Abraham, who lived and died 4,000 years ago, for in Christ we have become heirs of the promise which God made to him.

These, then, are the results of being 'in Christ', and they speak with powerful relevance to us today. For our generation is busy developing a philosophy of meaninglessness. It is fashionable nowadays to believe (or to say you believe) that

² There is a larger sense of the law as well. Paul understood that the essence of the law is written on the hearts of all people; that our consciences tell us to love the Creator and one another (see Romans 1:18-32). Thus, in the larger sense, Paul can speak of all humans being slaves under the law.

³ In the Old Testament, there were kinsmen redeemers who would buy back relatives from debt and slavery. The Lord God Almighty is portrayed as the redeemer of Israel, delivering Israel from its enemies. Jesus Christ is never referred to as the Redeemer. Instead, Jesus is the means of our redemption from sin. The biblical language of redemption is all bound up with slavery and freedom, bondage and deliverance.

⁴ Stott, J. R. W. (1986). *The message of Galatians: Only one way* (pp. 101-102). Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. The deity pronouns are the author's.

life has no meaning, no purpose. There are many who admit that they have nothing to live for. They do not feel that they belong anywhere, or, if they belong, it is to the group known as 'the unattached'. They class themselves as 'outsiders', 'misfits'. They are without anchor, security or home. In biblical language, they are 'lost'.

To such people comes the promise that in Christ we find ourselves. The unattached become attached. They find their place in eternity (related first and foremost to God as His sons and daughters), in society (related to each other as brothers and sisters in the same family) and in history (related also to the succession of God's people down the ages). This is a three-dimensional attachment which we gain when we are in Christ—in height, breadth and length. It is an attachment in 'height' through reconciliation to the God who, although radical theologians repudiate the concept and we must be careful how we interpret it, is a God 'above' us, transcendent over the universe He has made. Next, it is an attachment in 'breadth', since in Christ we are united to all other believers throughout the world. Thirdly, it is an attachment in 'length', as we join the long, long line of believers throughout the whole course of time.

Further, it is not that we are going to be heirs, we are heirs now -- already. We may not act like God's heirs much of the time, but that is who we are. If I had to act like an heir to be an heir . . . well, let's just say that the inheritance would forever elude my grasp.

Paul's point in this passage is larger than just the true identity of the Galatian Christians. He reminds them of their own experience of God's Spirit, which is the evidence and guarantee of their new life in Christ. Nonetheless, many of them still look to the keeping of the Jewish law as the mark of their salvation. They don't fully realize that the arrival of Jesus Christ freed them from the curse of needing to keep a law that they could not keep. Because God gave them the Law, they know sin in a way that other peoples do not.

In Christ, who was himself born under this nanny, the Law, so that he could free us from the custodian's care, we, in Peterson's graceful paraphrase, "experience our rightful heritage." And our heritage is that we are new creations, made alive in Christ. As heirs, we have a new status: we are God's children.

Yes, we can

And as God's Spirit-filled heirs, we can grasp that all of our stuff is not really ours, but is held in trust for God. We are trustees of what God has entrusted to us (Genesis 1:22-31). Further, we are empowered by God to work the works of his kingdom. We can accomplish far more for God than we imagine. And we are to accomplish it together. We are new creations bound together by God into a union that transcends all social divisions, whether of gender, race, education, or denomination. Together, our only response to God ought to be, "Yes, of course, . . . what's next?"

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Let's talk about adoption first. What does it mean to you to be among God's sons and daughters right alongside Jesus? In the eyes of our laws, there is no difference in standing between natural children and adopted children. What do you think Paul wants you to grasp about your relationship with God?
2. What does it mean to you be one of God's heirs. Since God lives, it can't mean that all that once was God's is now yours. Are you responsible for what God has entrusted to you? If so, how? We are pushing this "inheritance" analogy a lot, but what light can it shed on our relationship to all our "stuff?"
3. Paul doesn't try to persuade the Galatians they have been given God's Spirit. He simply observes that the presence of God's Spirit among them proves that they have been accepted into full covenant relationship with God. Do you think that God's Spirit moves among us? How would we know? Is there any evidence of the

Spirit's activity? What sort of evidence ought there to be? What evidence is there in your own life?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on inheritance*

Monday, Genesis 12:1-3, 26:1-5 God makes promises to Abraham and to his heir.

Tuesday, Genesis 28:10-15 The promise made to Isaac's heir.

Wednesday, Exodus 3:23-25 The promise made to Abraham and his heirs is also a promise for these descendants of Abraham.

Thursday, 1 Kings 2:1-11 David's last words for his heir, Solomon.

Friday, Matthew 19:27-30 Jesus teaches on inheriting eternal life.

Saturday, Ephesians 1:10-15 We have received an inheritance in Christ.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus. Next up: The gospel of John

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *The Old Testament: Sacred and Strange*