

Galatians

Unbound, Unchained, Unbroken

Week 7 | Galatians 3:26–4:7

Lisa Scheffler, author

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I know several people who have adopted children into their families. These kids came from homes where the parents, for a variety of reasons, weren't able to care for them. They were joyfully and expectantly welcomed into new families and given love. But that doesn't mean it was always easy.

Even if the adopted parents do everything they can to prepare, the transition to a new home can be difficult. Challenges can crop up as children acclimate to a new environment. And even if they were adopted as infants, various issues can crop up at each stage of the child's development. As wonderful as adoption is, adoptive families will tell you, it's not without its struggles. They will also tell you, it's worth it.

When we trust in Christ, we become part of God's eternal family. God is our Father who accepts us, loves us, and guides us as we grow in our relationship with him, but as with human adoption, it's not always easy. We are leaving behind an old way of life and have to learn new ways so we can live with our heavenly family. We also have to learn how to get along with our spiritual siblings. At each new stage of our spiritual life, we have to come to terms with what it means to be a child of God. Though there are growing pains, it's a vast understatement to say it's worth it!

As we move from Galatians 3 into Galatians 4, we see Paul use the image of adoption to explain our relationship with Christ and with others. This week, we'll discover what it means to be an heir of God and to call him our *Abba* Father.

Day 1

Last week we saw Paul wrestling with questions about the law. His opponents had challenged his gospel and were insisting that Gentile Christians in Galatia follow certain Jewish customs, such as circumcision, and dietary restrictions. Paul goes back into Israel's history, all the way

to the Covenant with Abraham, to show that these “works of the law” were never meant to make someone right with God. It’s always been faith that saves, and ultimately, the object of that faith is Jesus Christ. Acceptance into God’s covenant family comes from your allegiance to Christ. Nothing else is needed.

In the passage we’ll look at this week, we’ll see Paul using family language. Because of Jesus, whether believers are Jews or Gentiles, they are included in Abraham’s family line and recipients of all the promises that were fulfilled in Christ.

Think about this family language as you read through the passage for the week — Father, son, adoption, heir. Think about what it means to be an heir. In the first century, the heir was the first born male and received the bulk of the inheritance (if not all of it). Therefore, an heir was the most valuable child, at least as far as that society was concerned. Notice how Paul plays on this belief.

Read

Galatians 3:26–4:7 (NIV)

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

⁴ What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ² The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³ So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. ⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

- According to this passage, how do you become a child of God?
- What are you if you “belong to Christ”? What does that mean to you?

Respond

What a joy to have the Spirit and approach God as *Abba*, Father! In the first century *Abba* was a term of endearment and familiarity, like *Dad*. Jesus has redeemed us — we are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters. We are dearly loved children! No matter how the world judges us because of our race, ethnicity, social status, or gender, we are precious in the sight of our Dad. Rejoice in that this week.

This week, let's also consider how we can find greater unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ, particularly those who are from different races, ethnicities, social classes or gender. How can we show them Christlike love, kindness, and acceptance? How can we be better listeners and try to understand their experiences? How can we seek their good, even if it costs us something? Pray for the Spirit to move as we think about what it means to be "one in Christ."

Day 2

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In Snow White, the evil queen is so jealous of her step daughter that she tries to have her killed. In Cinderella, the wicked stepmother gives her biological daughters anything they could wish for and treats Cinderella, her step daughter, like a slave.

These fairy tales are dramatic and extreme, but they play upon the very real fears that step-children and adopted children have. They worry that they won't be accepted and that their siblings will be privileged and favored over them. It's something that good step and adoptive parents try their hardest to avoid.

It's something that God the Father refuses to tolerate in his eternal family.

Read

Galatians 3:26–29

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Reflect

The first century was dominated by strict social hierarchies. There was a Jewish prayer recommended by rabbis for men to pray that thanked God that "I am not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman." The Roman world was no better. In their history of the great philosopher Socrates, they remembered, "There were three blessings for which he was grateful to Fortune: first that I was born a human being, and not one of the brutes, next that I was born a man and not a woman, a Greek, and not a barbarian." Throughout the early church, Christians had to struggle to shed the value system of their culture and embrace the "all" that Paul repeats in verses 26 through 28.

In Christ, the mistreatment of those with less privilege and power is unacceptable. In verse 26 Paul notes that all believers are children of God and have been baptized into Christ. Baptism not only declared your faith in Christ, it signified that you were a part of God's people. So, Baptism not only replaces circumcision as the primary rite, it is available to women the same as men.

When Paul says that there is no "male *and* female" rather than "male *or* female" in verse 28, he is taking his hearers back to Genesis 1:26-27 where scripture teaches us that God made humankind in his image, he created them "male and female." We are all image bearers of the eternal God, and when we accept Christ, we become his child.

When we gather around God's table as his children, distinctions that create hierarchies are obliterated. Paul needed the Galatians to understand this. Jews weren't more valued than Gentiles, slaves weren't worth less than free people, and men and women have equal worth in the family of God.

In God's family, everyone is an heir. In the first century, slaves couldn't own property. They weren't even allowed to marry, so they couldn't have any legitimate heirs. They were stripped of their personhood and became property. In the kingdom of God, there won't be any of this dehumanizing behavior. The eternal inheritance we receive in Christ is offered to anyone regardless of ethnicity, social status, or gender. In Christ we are *all* children of God through faith!

Paul is not saying that these distinctions are non-existent, only that they can't be used as an identity markers that grant status to some and exclude or permit the oppression of others. Many of us take pride in how our gender, heritage, and experiences make us who we are, and that's not at issue here. In fact, the body of Christ can be stronger because of all the different perspectives our distinctiveness brings. When we find strength in our differences instead of using them to push others down, the Spirit can unite us.

Differences in ethnicity, social class, and gender within a church can benefit everyone, if we're willing to learn from each other. For example, we should consider what Black and Asian Christians who have firsthand experience with prejudice and discrimination could teach us about faithful endurance and loving our enemies. Those who lack power or status in a society have might be able to show us how to better trust God and experience joy in suffering. Women who've been silenced, ignored or even denigrated because of their sex can teach us about patience, and how to extend grace and forgiveness.

In Christ, when we see one another as a true brother or sister, worthy of love and with wisdom to share, we can strive to live according to Paul's statement, "we are all one in Christ Jesus." We can also work together to fight the prejudice and discrimination that oppresses and exploits those society deems less worthy.

Respond

How do you see differences dividing believers today? How can an emphasis on what Paul says here help?

Take some time to praise God for your inclusion into the family of God. Ask the Spirit to guide you in how you should treat your spiritual siblings.

Day 3

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If you go way back and trace the history of kingdoms in places like Europe, you will sometimes find a child who is named king. Because of the early death of the monarch, the child who is the rightful heir might be named as ruler. But of course, they don't yet rule. Although they are the rightful heir, they are just a child. And if they are a child, they understandably aren't given a lot of decision-making power. Even the young king is told what to eat and when to go to bed. His title means very little until he comes of age.

Paul is continuing to use family language, but he is sketching a picture much bigger than the individual believer. He's using the image of an heir to represent God's people.

Read

Galatians 4:1–5

4 What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. 2 The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. 3 So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. 4 But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

Reflect

Essentially, the argument that Paul makes in the passage we read yesterday is: “(1) Faith in Jesus Christ makes a person a “son of God,” and this obtains for everyone (3:28); (2) being a “son of God” means that a person is also a member of Abraham’s seed, because one becomes associated with Christ, who is the Seed of Abraham (v. 29). Since believers are members of Abraham’s seed, (3) they are also ‘heirs according to the promise’ (3:29)”¹

¹ Scot McKnight, [Galatians](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 195.

Throughout this letter, Paul has insisted that God does not play favorites between his children. To put it in more modern terms, his Gentile children will not be treated like Cinderella while his Jewish children are favored with special blessings. Faith in Christ gives them equal seating around God's table. The Jewish people may be biological descendants of Abraham, but Gentile believers who are "in Christ" are also brought into his line. What does this mean? Unlike in the Jewish and Roman world, it wasn't just free, first-born males who were heirs. All God's children are his heirs. But heirs have to grow up first before they can inherit.

Recall that in our passage last week, Paul talked about the law being a guardian. I included a quote from N.T. Wright where he used the word "babysitter" instead of guardian. The verses we are looking at today show us why he picked that particular word. In some sense, Israel was like a young heir. Because they had not fully grown up, they were under the guardianship of the law, and therefore a slave to the law. Remember the law also revealed sin, and by doing so was an instrument of judgment that trapped those under it.

Gentiles were likewise trapped and needed to "grow up" before they could be heirs. Paul says that while they were underage, they were enslaved by the *stoicheia* or "elemental forces" of this world. Scholars debate what exactly Paul means by this. Paul could be speaking of "basic components, such as fundamental principles of learning"² Yet, we know that in the pagan religions practiced by gentiles, people revered the elements of nature. "Some Jewish sources directly linked the elements with Greco-Roman gods by observing that some gentiles worshiped the elements," so Paul may be thinking of "the elements" in 4:3 as something like heavenly bodies, with some presumed link to deities (in gentile minds, if not his own).³

Another option is that Paul is speaking of actual supernatural beings. Some early Christians saw demonic forces "behind the astral deities represented by the zodiac, the pagan gods of Greece and Rome, as well as the national and tribal deities who were believed to superintend the political destiny of every distinctive ethnic group in the world."⁴ So Paul could be speaking of the elemental forces the same way he spoke of "principalities and powers" in Ephesians 6:12.

Regardless of which view we take, Paul's point is clear. Both Jew and Gentile were trapped under the control of oppressive forces — the law for Jews and "elemental forces" for Gentiles. "It doesn't have to be this way!" Paul is almost shouting through out this letter.

Paul doesn't want the Galatian Christians to go backwards under the dominion of anything, because Christ came to set them free. Free from the law and any other force, they could at last embrace their position as sons and heirs. In Christ, we are no longer slaves, but children of God!

² Keener, 326.

³ Peter Oakes, *Galatians*, ed. Mikeal C. Parsons, Charles H. Talbert, and Bruce W. Longenecker, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 135.

⁴ Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 299.

Respond

So, if we are heirs of God, what will our inheritance be? What does it mean for you to be an heir of God? Take some time to reflect on that today.

Day 4

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When we picture adoption, we often think of a couple adopting an infant or at least someone under the age of eighteen. That wasn't necessarily true in the Roman world. Adoption was often less about forming a family than providing an heir.

For example, Roman emperors frequently had to adopt an heir. Murder plots against the emperor's family were common, so some heirs were lost. Some emperors had difficulty siring an heir. Others were so disappointed by their biological children that they sought a competent heir elsewhere. In the span of accessions in the 97 years between Emperor Nerva and Emperor Commodus, every heir to the throne was adopted.⁵

Understanding the context of the Roman world sheds light on Paul's analogy here in Galatians 4. To be an heir that was chosen and adopted into a family was a great honor.

Read

Galatians 4:4–7

⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

- List all activities of the Father (God), the Son and the Spirit that are mentioned in these verses.

Reflect

⁵ Michelle J. Morris, "[Adoption](#)," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

According to commentator Timothy George, these verses “contain one of the most compressed and highly charged passages in the entire letter.”⁶ Just look at all Paul packs into just a few verses! Paul exalts the Son, the redemption he provides and the adoption that he made possible. He then goes on to explore the effect the Spirit. Ultimately, he concludes, this activity has allowed us to be children and heirs!

Our passage here in Galatians echoes what Paul writes to the church in Rome:

14 For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. 15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:14–17)

Much of the Christian life is about owning our new identity in Christ. We must allow the Spirit to empower us to put to death ways of thinking and acting that are inconsistent with who we are now, an adopted child of God. Like a pauper who is adopted by the king and becomes a prince, we have been welcomed into the royal family of God. Leaving the realm of the flesh behind, we have to embrace this identity, so we can live out who we’ve become.

“*Abba*” is the Aramaic word for “father,” or “Dad.” It’s a title that speaks to the new intimacy we have with God through Christ and by the Spirit. The fact that we are God’s children has profound implications. He did not bring us into his family to eat crumbs that fall from his table, but to inherit the kingdom with Christ. Paul makes the astounding claim that we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ!

Why is Paul using the word sonship and not a more inclusive term? After all, Paul is talking about God’s sons *and* daughters? As we’ve discussed, in the ancient world, only sons could inherit. So Paul is speaking literally here, yet, it goes beyond that. Paul is not denigrating women, he is elevating them. To every young slave girl, sitting in a house church and hearing this letter, he is saying *you* are a son and heir too.

Scholars estimate that nearly 35% of the population of the Roman empire were enslaved and could not inherit money, property, or position. The situation was even more bleak for women who had no control over their bodies or the fate of their children. In the natural world, being a “son” and “heir” would be impossible. In God’s kingdom, it is the King’s unassailable decree. So, imagine what it would feel like to be a slave and hear verse 7 read directly to you, “So *you* are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.” Incredible!

We shouldn’t leave this passage without also acknowledging the beautiful picture of the Trinity that is painted here. We see the activity of the Father, Son and Spirit. “Though theologians did not use the word ‘trinity’, and the technical terms associated with it, until

⁶ George 299.

some time later than Paul, the roots of the three-in-one Christian understanding of God are already present in this, one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest, document we possess from the young church.”⁷

The same Spirit that hovered over the waters at the moment of creation, that anointed ancient kings and prophets is now sent out as the Spirit of God’s Son, given to all God’s children, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man and woman. “For the house-church members, this is astonishing. [Emperor] Octavian might claim to be son of a god. For a craftworker’s slave girl to claim this turns the status hierarchy upside down”⁸

Respond

What does it mean to you that you are a child of God with a glorious inheritance? How does knowing this affect the way you live now? How about how you endure suffering and tragedy?

Consider making the following prayer your own as you praise God, your Father. Then bring all your needs to him today. He loves you so!

Father, I love you! I want to know you as my “Abba.” Remind me that I am your beloved child when I am tempted to rebel against you. Remind me of the inheritance I have in Christ as I endure hard times. Help me experience all that it means to be your son or daughter...

Day 5

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Happy Friday!

Let’s take some time reflect on what we’re learning here in Galatians, spend some time with the Father as we rejoice in the work of the Son, and ask the Spirit to guide us according the Word.

Reflect

Take another look at [Galatians 3:26–4:7](#).

⁷ Tom Wright, [Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 47.

⁸ Oakes, 138.

- What is Paul's main point in this passage? How does he want people in the Galatian church to act toward their brothers and sisters in Christ? How might recognizing that they are an heir affect the way they think and behave in everyday life?
- What has stayed with you personally as you've studied this passage?

Connect

For some of us, it is not easy to relate to God as Father. Not all of us have had good relationships with our earthly dads. Maybe yours was short-tempered and angry, and maybe that anger turned into abuse. Maybe yours was never around, an absent figure who still seems to haunt you to this day. Maybe yours was impossible to please. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn't seem to gain his approval.

Unfortunately, in a broken world, there seems to be an infinite number of ways humans can hurt one another, even those they are supposed to love and protect. Even their own children. And when our relationship with our earthly father is painful or difficult, it can tarnish our view of God.

Yet, God is our Father in the truest, best sense of the word, because he created the role himself. He is your *Abba*, Father — your Dad. He finds joy in caring for you, and lavishing you with good things, but will discipline you if it's in your best interest. He loves you with a pure, unconditional love. You are completely safe and secure in Christ. You can trust your heavenly Father. He has a glorious inheritance that you can begin to enjoy, even in the present moment. The more you accept that you are a child and heir of God, the easier surrendering your will to his will be.

And part of his divine will is that his children love one another. We should welcome all of our spiritual siblings to the table, even when the world tells us that our differences should keep us apart. We need to humbly listen and learn. We must be willing to lay down our rights for the good of one another because that's what Jesus, the eternal Son of God did for us.

We hold our heads high because we are children of God and heirs of the Kingdom, but we are willing to humble ourselves low to show the sacrificial love of Christ to those in our spiritual family.

Respond

Slow down, pray over these prompts, and ask the Spirit to direct you.

Ask the Father:

- What do you want me to take away from what I've studied this week? What do you want me to remember and keep present with me?
- What do you want me to do with the truth of your Word? What is the one, next, right step that you want me to take?

- What are you teaching me about you? About who you are and the relationship I have with you? How can I worship and love you based on what you've revealed?

If you've had a difficult relationship with your earthly Father, take your pain to your heavenly Father in prayer. Pray for wisdom and guidance in that relationship. Pray for the ability to forgive, so you can be free.

How can you show sacrificial love for a sibling in your spiritual family? How can you listen and learn from someone who is different from you?

There are people in your life who don't know that they can be children and heirs of God by trusting in Christ! What kind of difference could that make in the life of a friend, neighbor, family member, or co-worker? Ask the Spirit to guide you in telling them!

Pray for the opportunity for meaningful conversations!

Next week

Paul makes one more plea for the Galatians to reject the false gospel and return to the one he first preached.