

Galatians

Welcome to Adulthood!

Galatians 4:1-11

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Scripture

In the 1998 Disney movie *Parent Trap*, identical twins who were separated at birth by their parents' divorce accidentally meet 11 years later at summer camp. Together the twins plan to switch identities, so each can meet the respective parent she's never known and try to bring their parents together again.

As Annie, who is pretending to be Hallie, disembarks from her plane, her father is waiting for her. Annie is tentative but exuberant as she sees him. After a warm embrace they travel home.

As they drive toward his home, Annie discusses the camp, ending almost all her sentences with the word "Dad." He asks her, "Why do you keep saying 'Dad' at the end of every sentence?"

Annie answers, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize I was doing it, Dad. Sorry, Dad." They both laugh.

"Do you want to know why I keep saying 'Dad'? The truth?"

The father says, "Because you missed your old man so much, right?"

"Exactly. It's because in my whole life—I mean, you know, for the past eight weeks—I was never able to say the word 'Dad.' Never. Not once. And if you ask me, a dad is an irreplaceable person in a girl's life. Think about it. There's a whole day devoted to celebrating fathers. Just imagine someone's life without a father. Never buying a Father's Day card. Never sitting on their father's lap. Or being able to say 'Hi, Dad,' or, 'What's up, Dad?,' or, 'Catch you later, Dad.' I mean, a baby's first words are always 'Dada,' aren't they?"

The father asks, "Let me see if I get this. You missed being able to call me 'Dad'?"

Annie answers, "Yeah, I really have, Dad."

There is within us a deep desire to have a relationship with our Dads. No one wants to feel like an orphan or an outcast.

In today's text the apostle Paul teaches us that when we become Christians we receive the gift of sonship. We become sons and daughters of the living God. Let us read Galatians 4:1-11:

¹ What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ² He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³ So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. ⁴ But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. ⁶ Because you are 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 a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? ¹⁰ You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. (Galatians 4:1-11)

Introduction

My twenty-first birthday was during the summer vacation after my first year at the University of Cape Town. I was home for the summer working as an underground surveyor at—believe it or not—Freddie's Gold Mine!

On the evening of my birthday my Dad asked me to go and get something out of the garage. I walked into the garage and was surprised by about fifteen friends who had come to celebrate my birthday. It was a great party and I thoroughly enjoyed myself. But the party was special for another reason too.

You see, in South Africa we have a custom that I have not observed in this country. We have a semi-formal rite of passage si-

gnifying the time a child passes from childhood to adulthood. When a person turns twenty-one we have a somewhat formal recognition that marks that person as an adult.

Actually, even according to South African law at that time, a person was only acknowledge as an adult at the age of twenty-one.

So my twenty-first birthday party was a very special occasion for me because on that day my Dad said to me, “Son, you now have the status of an adult in the eyes of the law. All of the responsibilities and privileges that belong to an adult now belong to you too. Welcome to adulthood!”

In our passage today, the apostle Paul develops the analogy of a child becoming and adult. In fact, he started this analogy back in Galatians 3:23.

He compares the position and privileges of a child (who is regarded as a minor in the eyes of the law) to those of a slave, with the figures of child and slave representing life under the law, and the figures of adult and son representing life in Christ.

The analogy consists of a person *before* salvation, when he is under God’s law, and a person *after* salvation, when he is in Christ. Paul concludes this section with an impassioned appeal to Christians to live the Christian life.

Lesson

Paul’s sequence of thought may be summarized as follows: “Once we were slaves. Now we are sons. How, then, can we turn back to slavery?”

As we continue our study, please know that much of this material today comes from John Stott. We shall begin by first examining our condition under the law. Then we shall note God’s action in Christ. And finally, we shall notice Paul’s appeal to Christians.

I. Our Condition under the Law (4:1-3)

First, let’s examine our condition under the law.

Throughout much of his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul has a great deal to say about our condition under the Law of Moses before we became Christians. In Galatians 4, he continues to expand on this theme.

A. *The Illustration (4:1-2)*

Paul begins his discussion of our condition under the law with an illustration.

He says in verses 1-2, **“What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.”**

I have already mentioned that there is a clearer rite of passage that marked when a child became an adult in South Africa than in this country.

It was even clearer in ancient times. William Barclay, the renowned Scottish New Testament scholar, describes the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood for Jews, Greeks, and Romans.

In the Jewish world, on the first Sabbath after a boy had passed his twelfth birthday, his father took him to the Synagogue, when he became *A Son of the Law*. The father articulated a benediction, “Blessed be thou, O God, who has taken from me the responsibility for this boy.” The boy then prayed a prayer in which he said, “O my God and God of my fathers! On this solemn and sacred day, which marks my passage from boyhood to manhood, I humbly raise my eyes unto thee, and declare with sincerity and truth, that henceforth I will keep thy commandments, and undertake and bear the responsibility of my actions towards thee.” There was a clear dividing line in the boy’s life; overnight he became a man.

In Greece a boy was under his father’s care from the age of seven until he was eighteen. He then became what was called an *epebos*, which might be translated as “cadet,” and for two years he was under the direction of the state. The Athenians were divided

up into ten *phratriai*, or “clans.” Before a lad became a cadet, at a festival called the *Apatouria*, he was received into the clan; and at a ceremonial act his long hair was cut off and offered to the gods. Once again, growing up was quite a definite process. There was a clearly marked transition from childhood to adulthood.

Under Roman law the year at which a boy grew up was not definitely fixed, but it was always between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. At a sacred festival called the *Liberalia* he took off the *toga praetexta*, which was a toga with a narrow purple band around the edge of it, and he put on the *toga virilis*, which was a plain white toga which adults wore. He was then conducted by his friends and relatives down to the forum and formally introduced to public life. It was essentially a religious ceremony. And once again there was quite a definite day on which the lad moved from childhood to adulthood.¹

When a boy was a *minor* in the eyes of the law, he might be the owner of a vast estate but he could not make a legal decision. He was not in control of his own life. Everything was done and directed for him. Wealthy families would have **guardians and trustees** assigned to take care of the boy. For all practical purposes the **child**, even though he was the **heir** to his father’s inheritance, had no more freedom than if he was a **slave**. As commentator William Hendriksen points out, “the child was only an *heir de jure*, not an *heir de facto*; he was heir by legal right but not heir in fact.”²

B. *The Comparison (4:3)*

Paul now continues to make the comparison.

“**So also,**” Paul continues, “**when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world**” (4:3).

Paul does not specify what **the basic principles of the world** are. Bible teachers have offered various suggestions. In the context

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, The Daily Bible Study Series (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), 34.

² William Hendriksen, *Galatians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, n.d.), 156.

it seems most likely to refer to the elemental things of human religion.

All of the religions of that day—and, indeed, in our own day—have at their heart a man-made system of works. They were filled with rules and regulations, the obeying of which was thought to make a person right with deity.

However, no matter what religious system a person subscribed to, he was still a slave to sin.

John Wesley was an honor graduate of Oxford University, an ordained clergyman in the Church of England, and a scholar in theology. He was active in practical good works, regularly visiting the inmates of prisons and workhouses in London and helping distribute food and clothing to slum children and orphans. He studied the Bible diligently and attended numerous services throughout the week. He gave generous offerings to the church and alms to the poor. He prayed and fasted and lived an exemplary moral life.

Wesley even spent several years as a missionary to the American Indians in what was then the British Colony of Georgia. Yet, upon returning to England he confessed in his journal, “I who went to America to convert others was never myself converted to God.”

Later, reflecting on his unconverted condition, he said, “I had even then the faith of a slave, though not that of a son.”

Wesley tirelessly did everything he could to live a life acceptable to God, yet he knew something vital was missing. It was not until he went “very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street” one evening that he was truly and soundly converted and discovered genuine Christian faith.

“I felt my heart strangely warmed,” he wrote. “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

Wesley was no longer **in slavery under the basic principles of the world**. He had become a son!

II. God's Action through Christ (4:2-7)

Second, let's note God's action through Christ.

Thankfully, God did not leave us under the law. He stepped into history and liberated us from the law's bondage over us.

A. *The Perfect Time (4:4a)*

The first thing to note about God liberating us from the law's bondage over us is that he did so at the perfect time.

God stepped into history, as the apostle Paul says in verse 4a, **“when the time had fully come.”** When Jesus was born, everything was just right for the arrival of the Messiah.

The time was right *religiously*. The Greek and Roman gods were incapable of satisfying people's spiritual hunger, and the Law of Moses for the Jews had shown them their utter inability to keep its perfect standards.

The time was also right *politically*. Rome had instituted the *pax Romana* (Roman peace), which provided economic and political stability. In addition, a road system was in place that afforded ease of travel over much of the region.

And finally, the time was right *culturally*. Greek was the *lingua franca*, the common language, throughout much of the Mediterranean world.

B. *The Best Way (4:4b-7)*

God stepped into history at the perfect time, and he did so in the best way by doing two things.

1. He sent his Son (4:4b-5)

First, God sent his Son.

Paul says in verse 4b, **“God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law.”**

Jesus Christ was sent to earth by the Father to join miraculously with a sinless human nature in the womb of a woman named Mary. At that moment, the Son of God also became the Son of Man. This God-man, Jesus Christ, was subject to the Mosaic Law. Yet, unlike all who preceded him and all who followed, he met the law's requirements perfectly. Consequently, Christ's divinity, humanity, and righteousness uniquely qualified him **“to redeem those under the law”** (4:5a).

As commentator John Stott explains, “If he had not been man, he could not have redeemed men. If he had not been a righteous man, he could not have redeemed unrighteous men. And if he had not been God's Son, he could not have redeemed men for God or made them the sons of God.”³

Why did the Father send Christ to purchase us from the slave market of sin? Why did God sacrifice so much for souls as unworthy as us? Paul explains the reason to us in verse 5b. It was so **“that we might receive the full rights of sons.”**

Because he is merciful and loving, God desired to make us members of his everlasting family. By believing in his Son, we become his spiritual sons.

III. Paul's Appeal to Christians (4:8-11)

Finally, with this groundwork now laid, Paul appeals Christians to live as sons and not as slaves.

Paul was concerned that the Galatians were turning back to the basic principles of the world again. He notes in verse 10 that they were **“observing special days and months and seasons and years!”** They were striving to obey the calendar of events laid out in the Mosaic Law in order to earn their salvation.

And so Paul says to the Galatians Christians in verses 8-11: **“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know**

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 106.

God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.”

If you have ever discipled someone in their walk with Christ and then seen them slip back into an unbiblical belief system and lifestyle, you can understand Paul’s disappointment and frustration. Paul appeals to Christians not to slip back into slavery, but to live as sons of God.

Conclusion

So, what do we learn from this passage? Paul teaches us what the Christian life is and also how to live it.

A. What the Christian Life Is

First, Paul teaches us what the Christian life is.

The Christian life is the life of sonship; it is not the life of slavery. It is freedom, not bondage.

The Christian life is not slavish obedience to the law of God as a means of achieving salvation. Our salvation does not depend on meticulous obedience to the law of God. Our salvation rests upon the finished work of Christ, on his sin-bearing, curse-bearing death, which is received by faith alone.

B. How to Live the Christian Life

Second, Paul teaches us how to live the Christian life.

The way to live the Christian life is to remember who and what we are. The essence of Paul’s message is: “Once we were slaves. Now we are sons. How, then, can we turn back to slavery?”

His question is an astonished, indignant expostulation. It is not impossible to turn back to the old life. In fact, the Galatians

had done so. But it is preposterous to do so. It is a fundamental denial of what we have become, of what God has made us if we are in Christ.

The way to avoid the Galatians' folly is to heed the apostle Paul's words. Let God's word keep telling us who and what we are if we are Christians. We must keep reminding ourselves what we have and are in Christ. One of the great purposes of daily Bible reading, prayer, and meditation is to do just this, that is, to remind us of who and what we are in Christ Jesus.

By the grace of God we must determine to remember what we once were and never to return to it. We must remember what God has made us to be and conform our lives to it.

A good example of this is John Newton, the author of my favorite hymn, "Amazing Grace!" He was an only child and his mother died when he was seven years old. He went to sea at the tender age of eleven and later became involved, in the words of one of his biographers, "in the unspeakable atrocities of the African slave trade." He plumbed the depths of human sin and degradation.

When he was twenty-three years old, on March 10, 1748, while his ship was in imminent peril of foundering in a terrific storm at sea, he cried to God for mercy—and he found it! He was truly converted, and he never forgot how God had mercy upon him, a former blasphemer.

He sought to remember diligently what he had previously been, and what God done for him. In order to imprint it on his memory, he had written in bold letters and fastened across the wall over the mantelpiece of his study the words of Deuteronomy 15:15: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you."

If we remember these things—what we once were and what we are now—we would have an increasing desire within us to live accordingly, to be what we are, namely, sons of God set free by Jesus Christ. Amen.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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