**Once a slave, but now a son**

March 16, 2014

Galatians 4:1-31

Key Verse 4:7 “So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.”

Two years ago at the Well conference, a senior missionary shared his testimony on “orphan spirit.” He basically said that he served God like a slave to earn his love. This made him burned out, anxious to get others’ approval, and fearful that he would be kicked out if he did not perform well. Even though he believed in Jesus, and was adopted into the family of God, he carried a lot of baggage from his past: baggage from years of feeling unloved, unlovely, unworthy. Baggage like fear and anxiety, distrust and insecurity, loneliness and a tendency towards performing to earn love. He confessed that he was freed from orphan spirit after truly accepting Father’s love. When we realize that we are sons of God, we feel safe in his love; we are able to walk in peace and joy. We are able to bless others instead of fighting for our own needs to be met. We are able to rest secure that he is always working for our best. Let’s think about what it means to be sons and daughters of God.

Look at verses 1-3. “What I am saying is that as long as an 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. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.” According to the Roman family law, a son was taken care of and trained by his guardian until he became 14 years old. And until he became 25 years old, he needed permission from the trustee to use his property. Guardians trained the heir to be a mature and independent grownup. When an heir was under guardians, he was indistinguishable from a slave. However, when a set time passed, the father would terminate the heir’s subjection to others. In a day, the heir’s status changed. He was given the full rights of a son to govern the estate. Then he was free from his former guardian and trustee. Typically, the father held a great feast to celebrate.

Likewise when we were subject to the law, we did not know God and had no rights as children. The law was given to us only as a guardian to harshly train us. In spite of this discipline, however, the law was powerless to make us righteous because of our sinful nature. Nobody could achieve righteousness by observing the law. The Jews endured great pains to try and obey all of God’s commands and rituals for their justification. The Gentiles without the law worked hard to follow human reasoning without true meaning in their lives. They both were bound by the elementary spiritual forces of the world and became slaves to them. They were like children subjected to guardians and trustees who were no different from slaves because their freedom was restricted. But God didn’t’ leave his children in slavery. Look at verses 4-5. “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.” Just as the heir could exercise his freedom and full rights only at the time set by his father, we can be free when the time set by God has fully come. It was the time when God sent his Son, Jesus Christ. Even though he is God by nature, he humbled himself to be born of a woman. He was despised and rejected from birth and throughout his whole life in order to be with us and to save us. Even though he made the law, he was born under the law to fulfill the law.

Apostle Paul explained this with redemption and adoption. ‘To redeem’ means ‘to set free from slavery by paying the full price’. A slave could not redeem himself, because he had no right to possess anything for himself. He would be a slave forever, unless somebody paid his ransom. Once, we were hopeless slaves under the law. Even though God gave the law as our guardians, the law only reminded us of our sins and condemned us because we were sinners. When Jesus paid our ransom through his blood, however, we became free. God’s intention is not just to save us from our miserable situation, but to adopt us as his own children. Here we need to think about the word “adoption.” In Roman law it meant that a slave could become a son who would inherit the estate of his master. When we see the movie “Ben-Hur,” we can find a good example. Judah Ben-Hur was a galley slave on a Roman ship with the number “41.” There was no way for him to escape his destiny as a slave. But during a battle at sea, he rescued Quintus Arias, the commander of the fleet. Quintus Arias was a friend of Caesar and a man of great influence in Rome. But he had no heir. So he adopted Judah Ben-Hur as his own son and made him his heir. Suddenly Judah’s status changed from a galley slave to a noble son. He received his father’s good name as a man of honor in the society. He also received vast property and was granted the right to reign over the household.

Apostle Paul further explains the blessings and privileges of children of God. Look at verses 6-7. “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.” God sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts. When the basic principles of the world were our guardians, we lived our lives in fear like orphans, wondering who will take care of me tomorrow. But now the Holy Spirit enables us to call out, “Abba, Father.” The word, ‘Abba’ is an Aramaic word similar to ‘Papa’ in English. It is used by small children in addressing their father. This shows us that the relationship between God and his people is indeed intimate. This was a revolutionary idea. To the Jews, who accused Jesus of identifying himself as the Son of God, it was unthinkable. Even today, they cannot call God “Father.” To the Gentiles, who worshiped many gods including unknown gods, it was unimaginable. God is the Creator and we are his creatures. We are different from God by nature. However, God adopted us as his children and let us know his perfect love for us through Christ. Now we can call God “Abba, Father.”

Actually, this idea came from our Lord Jesus. Jesus called God “Abba, Father” in his prayer (Mk 14:36). Jesus’ cry to God reveals the deep and personal nature of their love relationship. Jesus never doubted God’s love even in the most difficult times. This enabled Jesus to overcome all kinds of temptations and hardships and win the victory. By sending the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Father shares this same relationship with us. We can call God “Abba, Father”, and experience his love and power and have victory in any situation. God is the Almighty Creator God who made the heavens and the earth. God is the owner of all things. He became our Father. He is ready to answer all our prayers by providing limitless comfort, strength and wisdom. He enables us to live as more than conquerors in this hard world. He is always ready to welcome us and to provide mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:16).

Now we are no longer slaves, but God’s children. When we were in slavery, we had to keep the law out of fear. We had no freedom. But after God adopted us as His children, we can keep his law and commands freely and willingly. If a police car follows you while driving, how do you feel? Even though the police didn’t do anything to us, we cannot feel comfortable. This is life under the law. Even when we keep the law, there is no freedom in us. This kind of life is hopeless, miserable, restless and burdensome. But when we received adoption to sonship, we became free indeed, not because we kept all the law but because God accepted us as his children. Then, we become willing to obey God with joy and freedom. This is true freedom that only God’s children can enjoy.

Lastly, God made us an heir. This is our true identity. We are foreigners and strangers on earth. But we are heirs of our heavenly Father and inherit his kingdom. The 19th century evangelist John Wilbur Chapman told a story of a man in his church. This man was searching for his son who had left home at the age of 13. The father searched for his son for 18 years without giving up. One day he happened to go to a railroad station in Pennsylvania. A man who looked like a homeless drug addict approached him and begged him for twenty-five cents. It was his son! The father cried out, “Tom! I am your father!” Then the man looked at him and said, “Please spare a quarter.” The father hugged his son and said, “Twenty-five cents does not matter. I am your father. You are my son. Everything I have is yours. Even my life is yours. Come home and live with me!” Sometimes we forget that we are glorious heirs of God. We wander in the world seeking a quarter even though our heavenly Father wants to give us all things. Let’s accept that we are children of God and heirs of God and act accordingly.

I learned that under the laws of Canada and America, an adopted child has certain privileges assigned to them that even natural offspring are not afforded. For example, you cannot disown them. You cannot disinherit an adopted child. They have equal share in the will of the parents. This gives the adopted child unshakeable confidence that they will always belong--so far as the law is concerned. So healing from the orphan spirit is to believe that we are children of God, cared dearly by the Father, and that we belong to God's family. It enables us to connect with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul was in deep distress to realize that the Galatian believers had come so far, only to turn back, fearing that faith in Christ was not enough. They were tempted to turn back to the old basic principles of the world. They wanted to keep Jewish religious rituals. In verse 9b, Paul rebuked them, saying, “...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?” Here “weak and miserable principles” refers to the rituals of Judaism, such as observing special days, months, seasons and years (10). Many people think that Christian life is a matter of following rituals. When they follow well, they become proud, self-righteous and argumentative. But when they fail, they despair, fall into condemnation, and lose their joy of life. Even unrepentant people can observe rituals. It gives some people intense satisfaction to feel that there is something they can do to win God’s smile. But this implies that man has some strength, and hence, to that extent, he does not need the Savior. When the Galatians believed, they were filled with the joy and confidence of God. They were so ready to serve God and his servants, that they would have torn their eyes out to help Paul in his work. But they became fearful because their consciences were not yet clean. They could not believe that just by believing in Jesus, God would accept them as sons.

Paul rebuked them severely out of his great shepherd heart. In the Amplified Bible, verse 12 is translated, “Brethren, I beg of you, become as I am [free from the bondage of Jewish ritualism and ordinances], for I also have become as you are [a Gentile].” It was amazing that Paul became like the Gentiles. Before knowing Christ, he was extremely zealous for the traditions of Judaism (1:13:14). At that time he had a typical Jewish prejudice toward Gentiles. But when he came to know God through meeting the Risen Christ, he was set free from Jewish legalism. He began to put aside any barrier that would hinder others from seeing Christ in him. He became all things to all men in order to win them over to Christ. He said, “To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law...so as to win those not having the law” (1 Cor 9:21). This expressed the incarnation of Christ. Christ left the glorious kingdom of heaven to come into this broken world to become like us. The irony is that the Galatians wanted to be what Paul had been before he knew Christ. So he pleaded with them, “become like me.”

Look at verse 19. “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you…” Paul considered them like his own children. He was ready to go through the pains of childbirth for them again. He experienced the pains of childbirth when he preached the gospel to the Galatians for the first time. They were a source of great joy to Apostle Paul. But now they considered Paul as their enemy. The more he loved them, the more pain he must have felt. However, Paul accepted them as his dear children and was willing to endure pain for their spiritual growth. I don’t know what birth pains feel like but I know the pain of taking care of children as a father. It is really annoying when my children ignore me and pay no attention to my words. I poured out my anger at them many times. However, Paul didn’t pour out his anger but was ready to endure pain for them. He wanted Christ to be formed in them. Paul was a true shepherd and a spiritual father for them. He rebuked and challenged the Galatians with truth. But it was from his shepherd heart, not from human anger. He didn’t seek any profit from them but helped them to grow in the image of Jesus. Here we must deeply realize that God’s children need to grow spiritually and this process requires birth pains. We should appreciate those who have borne these pains for us. And we should be willing to bear spiritual birth pains to raise God’s children. For how long? “…until Christ is formed in you” (19).

Let’s remember that we are God’s glorious sons and heirs. So instead of looking for a quarter from someone else, let us trust in God that he will give us the best things.