**No Longer a Slave, but God’s Child**

October 6, 2019

Galatians 4:1-20

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

Several years ago at a winter retreat, a senior missionary shared his testimony on “orphan spirit.” He basically said that he served God like a slave to earn his love for 30 years. 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, and unworthy. Baggage like fear and anxiety, distrust and insecurity, loneliness and a tendency towards performing to earn love. He lived like a slave. He confessed that he was freed from orphan spirit after truly accepting the Father’s love. When we realize that we are children 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 that we are children of God.

Look at verses 1-3. “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. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces 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 the works of 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 live by their own ethics and reason without true meaning in their lives. They both were bound by the elemental 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 them in slavery.

Look at verses 4-5. “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.” Even though he is God by nature, Jesus humbled himself to be born of a woman. He was despised and rejected from birth and throughout his whole life. Even though he made the law, he was born under the law. He did this in order to redeem us so that we may receive adoption to sonship. ‘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 devil. 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.” To adopt someone is to make that person a legal son or daughter. Adoption is one of the metaphors used in the Bible to explain how Christians are brought into the family of God. The Bible also uses the metaphor of being “born again” into God’s family (John 3:3), which seems to be at odds with the concept of adoption because, normally, either a person is born into a family or adopted, not both. Both of these concepts are metaphors and should not be played against each other. Adoption was not common in the Jewish society. A person’s standing was based on his birth. In John 3, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, and he uses the Jewish concept of being born again (or born from above) to explain how one is brought into God’s family.

In the Roman world, adoption was a significant and common practice. These adoptions were not infant adoptions as is common today. Older boys and adult men were normally adopted. When the adoption was legally approved, the adoptee would have all his debts cancelled and he would receive a new name. He would be the legal son of his adoptive father and entitled to all the rights and benefits of a son immediately unlike natural children. He did not have to subject to guardians and trustees. In the movie Ben-Hur, we see a vivid portrayal of Roman adoption. In the movie, Judah Ben-Hur (a Jew) was a slave on a Roman ship as a rower 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 since his own son was killed in a war. So he adopted Judah Ben-Hur as his own son and made him his heir. Suddenly Judah’s status changed from a slave to a noble son. He received his father’s good name as a man of honor in the society, and has all the rights of inheritance. In the scene where the adoption is announced, Arius takes off his ancestral signet ring and gives it to young Arius. Young Arius says that he has received “a new life, a new home, a new father.” Paul, writing to Roman audiences, uses the metaphor of adoption, which a Roman audience would have understood.

When we come to faith in Christ, our debts are cancelled, we are given a new name, and we are given all the rights that heirs of God possess. One difference from Roman adoption is that Christians are not adopted because God thinks we will make worthy heirs. God adopts people who are completely unworthy, because He adopts on the basis of His grace. So, Christians have been born into God’s family (using a Jewish metaphor) and adopted into God’s family (using a Roman metaphor). The end result is the same; Christians are forever part of God’s family. Adopted children have the same privilege as natural children. But in some sense they have more privileges than natural children. First, in Roman adoption, a father could disown his natural-born son, but an adopted son could not be disowned. Second, God chose us so that He could adopt us. God chose me. He desired me. He wanted me. That doesn’t happen in birth, you just get what shows up. You can’t make a choice. But adoption is where you choose and you take a son you want. We were chosen by God out of a world of sinners to become His adopted children.

Apostle Paul further explains the blessings and privileges of children of God. Look at verses 6-7a. “Because you are his 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 God’s child.” When we were slaves under the elemental spiritual forces of the world, we lived our lives in fear like orphans, wondering who will take care of us tomorrow. But now the Holy Spirit in us 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 so that we may participate in his divine nature. Now we can call God “Abba, Father.” What a blessing it is to call God, the owner of all things, “Abba, 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 slaves, we had to keep the law out of fear. We were bound in the chains of the work-based religion. 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 doesn’t do anything to us, we don’t feel comfortable. This is life under the law. Even when we kept the law, there was no joy us. This kind of life was 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 willingly obey God with joy out of love. This is true freedom that only God’s children can enjoy.

Look at verse 7b. “Since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.” This is our true identity. Formerly we were slaves to sin, but God made us heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. We will inherit his kingdom, and reign with Christ. 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 me 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.

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 elemental spiritual forces 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 forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?” Here “weak and miserable forces” 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 favor. 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 since they began keeping laws, they became fearful. They could not believe that just by believing in Jesus, God would accept them as children.

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. Paul was a true shepherd and a spiritual father for them. He wanted Christ to be formed in them. He rebuked and challenged the Galatians with truth. Here we must deeply realize that God’s children need to grow spiritually and this process requires birth pains. This is called sanctification. It is becoming like Christ. Our salvation is not complete until we become like Christ. When we first believe, Christ comes and takes up residence in us. It is called justification. Sanctification is the process by which the believer in whom Christ dwells becomes more like Christ. Christ begins to shape the believer’s life so that he manifests the character of Christ, who thinks the way Christ thinks, who speaks the way Christ speaks, who acts the way Christ acts. This is Paul’s great painful desire for his people, and it is really the passion of any faithful pastor, to see Christ fully formed in those who are in his care. It is certainly my earnest desire for all of you.

Many times, when a slave is adopted, he lives with fear, not really believing that they are children, same as natural children. They have fear that if they don’t behave, they will be kicked out. They are even afraid to open a refrigerator to eat what they want. Let’s remember that we are God’s glorious children and heirs. We can never be disowned. Let’s have this glorious assurance in God our Father.