

Series: What God Was Thinking. . . The heart of God at Christmas
Inheritance

Galatians 4:1-7

I never really thought much about receiving an inheritance until my dad died 32 years ago. He and my mom had divorced a couple of years earlier. And none of us had much of an idea what my dad owned and what he owed. By the time everything was settled, each of us got a modest sum of money; it was nothing life-changing, but it was significant.

The thing that overshadowed the amount of the inheritance was the stress of settling dad's estate. Because of the divorce and because dad didn't have an updated will, it was messy; emotions ran high; unresolved conflicts surfaced. I've noticed similar dynamics in other families. An inheritance isn't always a blessing; sometimes it's a curse.

You may be wondering, "Why are you telling us this less-than-encouraging inheritance story two weeks before Christmas?" I'm telling you this story by way of contrast. Galatians 4 tells us that at the first Christmas, "inheritance" was on the heart and mind of God. God sent his Son into the world so that we might become his children and heirs with Christ who can look forward to an inheritance that is unqualified blessing. What we're going to see is that God wants us to live our lives with the knowledge that we have an eternal inheritance. That knowledge can change the way we relate to God. **Knowing that we have an imperishable inheritance waiting for us can give us a freedom that we've never had before** - not the freedom to do whatever we want, but the freedom to do the will of God!

This Advent season we've been studying passages that reveal what was on the heart and mind of God at the first Christmas. We saw from Philippians 2 that **humility** was on the mind of God the Son when he became one of us. Last week we saw from Hebrews 2 that **family** (God's family) was on the mind of Jesus at the first Christmas. Today we are going to see from Galatians 4 that **inheritance** was on the mind of God at the first Christmas.

A bit of context. . . The Galatian believers had started out strong, believing the gospel Paul had preached, namely, that salvation comes through faith in Christ alone. But false teachers (who were Jewish followers of Christ) had entered into their fellowship and taught that to be in God's family you needed to believe in Jesus AND you had to follow the Law. Throughout Galatians, Paul argues that Christ plus anything was "another gospel."

In chapter 3 Paul argues that if you want to be in God's family, you need to be an offspring/descendant of Abraham. God had promised to make Abraham a "great nation" (as numerous as the stars in the sky) and that through one of his descendants "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (see Genesis 12:1-3, 17:1-8, 22:15-19).

Paul then points out that the Law, the old covenant, came 430 years after God made that promise to Abraham. He says that the Law didn't replace the promise to Abraham; it was a temporary covenant that guided the Jewish nation along the way a guardian guides a child until they become an adult. Galatians 3 ends in this way (verse 29):

29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Paul argues that if you believe in Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring and you receive the inheritance. The inheritance doesn't come through the Law; it comes through Christ. In our passage Paul makes two points: first, Paul talks about what was true about us **before** Christ, and second, Paul talks about what is true of us **in** Christ.

Before Christ we were no different from slaves. (Galatians 4:1-3)

In these verses Paul gives an illustration to drive home the point that the Law was a temporary covenant that prepared the Jewish people for Christ. He begins with "I mean" (or "My point is this" - NIV). He's explaining 3:29.

1 I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

The scenario is that a wealthy man has an underaged son. And he has set a date when that son will inherit everything he owns. But until that date, the son has guardians and managers who make decisions for him. He is under the authority and direction of others who tell him what to do. One commentator (Osborne) described such a guardian as "a full-time baby sitter" who told the child what to do and not do. While he's a child, there's a sense in which he's no different from a slave. Even though he is the owner of everything, he has to wait until the date set by his father. **Then** he gets the inheritance.

Here's the point:

3 In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

Paul is picking up his argument from 3:24 where he said that "the law was our guardian until Christ came." Under the law, the Jewish people were like children waiting for their inheritance. The law was like a full-time baby sitter; it told them what to eat and not eat and gave them restrictions and regulations about virtually every area of life. Paul was saying that the Jewish people were just like the child in the illustration: they had a great inheritance before them; it was promised to Abraham. But until the date set by their heavenly Father, they were no different from slaves.

They "were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world." The term translated "elementary principles" has different meanings in different contexts. Here I think it refers to the regulations of the law. The term is used again in verse 9 where it refers to the

Jewish calendar which involved observing days and festivals throughout the year. I think Paul is referring to the ABC's of the law, the basic regulations. The Jewish people were "enslaved" to the law in the sense that it told them exactly what to do and when to do it.

Remember that the false teachers had told the Galatians that believing in Jesus wasn't enough. If they wanted to be in God's family they ALSO had to follow the law. Paul is telling them that to do so would be returning to slavery (see 5:1-6). To carry the analogy further, just like a child eventually needs to move beyond the ABC's to words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books, the Jewish people needed to move beyond the Law to the freedom found in Jesus the Messiah.

Unless you grew up in a Jewish household, this discussion might seem rather remote to you (it probably did to the Gentiles who read Paul's letter in Galatia). But there's a sense in which before Christ all of us were enslaved to some ABC's about how we should live our lives. Just like Jews living under the law, your ABC's weren't necessarily bad; like the law, they may have kept you pointed the right direction.

* Perhaps you lived by a basic moral philosophy of life: work hard, be honest, help other people, etc.

* Perhaps you had good religious habits before Christ: go to church every time the doors were open, pray, read your Bible, give, etc.

Whatever principles guided our lives before Christ, we were like that under-aged child who was no different than a slave. Again, this doesn't imply that our lives were horrible or that there was something wrong with our upbringing. It's simply the case that before Christ we don't have the full freedom of heirs who have received their inheritance.

In the next paragraph Paul reveals "the date set by the father," the date when we no longer need guardians and managers as full-time baby sitters. That date/day was Christmas, the day that God "sent forth his Son." Therefore, we see in verses 4 through 7 that:

In Christ we have our full inheritance as "sons." (Galatians 4:4-7) In Christ we are long longer enslaved to the elemental principles of the world.

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,

"Fullness of time" refers to the time set by our heavenly Father when he would set free those who were enslaved to the Law. The time had come for them/us to have the full status of "sons."

"But when the fullness of time had come, ***God sent forth his Son.***" This is what happened at the first Christmas: God sent forth his unique Son to become one of us. When God sent forth his Son, he was ***born of a woman.*** The Son of God became the son of Mary. He was born of a woman into a family with a lineage in order to fulfill the promises made to the descendants of various humans. In Genesis 3 God had told Satan that a descendant of the first woman would "bruise/crush [his] head. In Genesis 12 God had promised Abraham that through one of his descendants all the families of

the earth would be blessed. In 2 Samuel 7, God promised David that one of his descendants would reign on his throne forever. Jesus had to be born of a woman to be this offspring/seed/descendant who would fulfill these promises for humanity.

God sent for his Son, born of a woman, **born under the law**. Since he was born into a Jewish family, Jesus grew up observing the stipulations of the law (the old covenant). In one sense he experienced the law like everyone else. But in another sense he experienced it uniquely because he was perfectly obedient to the law. To use Jesus' own summary of the Law, he perfectly loved the Lord his God with all his heart, mind, and strength, and he perfectly loved his neighbor as himself.

Verse 5 tells us **why** God sent forth his Son, born of a woman and born under the law:

5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

To redeem means to "buy back" or "purchase" something. Through his death Jesus paid for our sins (he purchased us) so that all who believe in him now belong to God. The ultimate result, Paul writes, is "so that we might receive adoption as sons."

Paul is intentionally calling all believers (both male and female) "sons," because in his first century context, it was the firstborn son who received the inheritance. He's emphasizing status, not gender. Paul made this explicit back in chapter 3 when he said that "in Christ Jesus you are all **sons** of God, through faith" - both male and female (see 3:26 and 3:28).

Paul says here in 4:5 that God redeemed us "so that we might receive adoption as sons." The fact that God has **adopted** us means that we are wanted. God sent forth his son because he wanted you. The fact that he adopted us **as sons** means that we - all of us - have the highest possible status before him. God sent forth his Son so that you might enjoy the privileges of that status.

Notice how Paul describes the privilege of sonship in verse 6.

6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

Just as God had sent his Son, God also sent "the Spirit of his Son" into our hearts. In the deepest part of our being we are indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus. The resulting cry of our hearts is, "Abba! Father!" Abba is an Aramaic word that is brought over in the translations; it was a term of affection and respect that a child would use to address their father. The Spirit gives us this internal witness that the God who deserves our utmost respect is also our Father. It's not just a fact that we've been told; it's our heart's experience. In Romans 8:16 Paul wrote that "the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

Paul brings his argument full circle in verse 7 when he returns to the issue of inheritance.

7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

If you are a believer in Jesus, you have gone from being an heir who is no different than a slave to being a son who has come into his inheritance.

You may be wondering, “What exactly is our inheritance?” The short answer is “everything.” First and foremost, God is our inheritance; our Father in heaven, the Son at his right hand, and the Holy Spirit in our heart - the triune God is our treasure forevermore. And we get the new heaven and earth thrown in. And we get glorified bodies that are akin to the resurrected body of Jesus. And when this inheritance is “settled” (if that’s even the way to talk about it), it won’t be messy because we all have the status of full sonship. There is plenty for everybody for eternity. (See Romans 4:13, Matthew 5:5, Luke 18:29-30, etc.)

In Christ we have our full inheritance as “sons.” We begin experiencing that inheritance when we first believe, we continue to experience that inheritance throughout this life, and when Christ returns we fully experience that inheritance throughout eternity.

Remember why Paul stressed to the Galatians that they had this inheritance in Christ: because some were telling them, “Christ isn’t enough; you need Christ plus something if you really want to be in God’s family.” In chapter 5 Paul wrote:

1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

The application is really the same for us. ***Knowing that we have an imperishable inheritance waiting for us can give us a freedom that we’ve never had before.*** In the context of Galatians 5, Paul stresses that we have a freedom from sin and freedom to do the will of God. If you are a believer in Jesus, don’t let anybody (including yourself) tell you that Christ isn’t enough for you to know and follow God. If you’re a child of God, the Holy Spirit dwells within you. Don’t think you can’t go the Scriptures and hear the voice of God. Don’t think that you can’t ask and receive from God. Don’t think that the Holy Spirit can’t or won’t lead you.

Of course, God does speak through other people; and God can lead you through other people. God uses churches and ministries to further his Kingdom. But you don’t need a full-time baby sitter. You have the Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart. God wants you to experience his fulness.

The sports world is rather obsessed with records and breaking records. In the record books there is a way to indicate that some record needs to be qualified; it isn’t quite as great as it appears. Such a record has an asterisk (*) behind it. A classic example is the Major League Baseball single season home run record.

- * Babe Ruth hit 60 home runs in 1927.
 - * In 1961 Roger Maris broke Babe Ruth's record, hitting 61 home runs. In the record books, Maris got an asterisk beside his name because the baseball season was longer; it took him 8 more games to break Babe Ruth's record.
 - * In 1998 Mark McGwire broke Roger Maris' record, hitting 70 home runs in a season. McGwire got an asterisk by his name because (by his own admission) he used "performance enhancing drugs" (i.e., steroids) during his baseball career.
- If you have an asterisk by your name, it means, "Your accomplishment/status really isn't as great as it appears."

Galatians 4 is saying that in the book of life, nobody has an asterisk by their name. If you are right with God through faith in Jesus Christ you have gone from being a slave to a "son"; if you're a son, then you are a full heir with Christ. You will inherit EVERYTHING. Since that's the way God thinks about his children, that's the way we should think about ourselves and each other.