

**Galatians:
Commentary
Galatians 4:1-7**

Chapter 4 marks the transition from the theological to the practical application. With the closing verses of Chapter 3 addressing the application of God's inheritance to all people, Paul now shifts his focus to the Galatians (and all followers of Christ) as the heirs

1

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave,

Earlier ([Galatians 3:22](#)) and elsewhere (cf. [Rom. 6:16-20](#)), Paul explained that because by default people are born slaves to sin, the law serves as a universal pedagogue to unmercifully police each and every person. Because of faith in Jesus, we are no longer under that warden, but are heirs to God's promise to Abraham. Therefore, it is vital for Paul to explain a right understanding for Christ's followers as heirs.

The imagery presented here is that of an heir of a person of significance - substantial in possessions, authority and reputation. Paul argues that an heir of a even a person of this magnitude still lives in a house of order, and as long as the heir is a child, he is no different than a slave. The "child" here is of indeterminate age, but most scholars agree that the term can apply to any person under the age of majority. The common practice among the Gentile elite was to assign a nurse to the child in his infancy and toddler years, who would then be transitioned to the pedagogue as a primary aged child, and then to a guide or mentor in late adolescence until the age of 25. This system curtailed the liberties of the privileged young until they were at a culturally accepted age of maturity to independently handle their personal affairs.

though he is the owner of everything,

The limited freedoms of the heirs resulted in a life that looked similar to slavery, from the perspective of an absence of independent thought and action on the part of the heirs. Nonetheless, their identity as "master" or "lord" was not compromised by these limitations. Their identity as "owner of it all" was established not in their actual possession or stewardship of their inherited blessings, or even in the promise of said inheritance, but in their identity as the heir. Their identity as "owner" was a present reality that would have a future manifestation or expression. Until that future promise becomes the present reality, their restricted liberties under previsionary tutelage would cause their life to look like they were slaves rather than heirs.

2

but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

The earlier picture of all people under the unrelenting watch of the "Warden Law" foreshadows the application that Paul makes here that every person is in fact governed by a controlling force. Even in the most preferred circumstances of privilege and elitism, minors are under the guardianship of a guide or manager. The termination of this relationship giving way to the person's independence is established by the predetermined date of the father. This was a societal norm that transcended cultures and would have been widely understood and accepted among most if not all audiences, Jew and Gentile, in Galatia and the extended regions where the letter eventually was delivered and read.

3

In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary

principles of the world.

Paul applies this analogy of the guardianship over the heir to himself and his faith brothers and sisters. He explains that all people, by birth and by nature are children of God because He is the creator. And every person has the potential to be His heir. Upon birth, every person is put under the tutelage of the law, and in effect becomes like a servant to the law, which itself is a servant to God. Effectually, every person is enslaved by the "elementary principles of the world." There is much debate about what this term means. The most reasonable, supportable explanations for the meaning of "elementary principles" include:

- *They are the natural laws and concepts that point people to the holy law of God.* More than "Thou Shalt not..." (which are the laws themselves), it is suggested that the elementary principles are the universal morality that compels people to attempt to earn merit before God. The basic, intrinsic compulsion of man is try to be good, try to earn favor, try to deserve merit.
- *They are the elements of the world that limit and constrain man.* This is the least supportable of theories, suggesting that because of the fall, we are impaired by our limitations living within the physical realm. Because of the fall, faith is required, and people without faith exist within a life that is controlled by the elements - the physical world. While this interpretation is defensible from the perspective of the fall of creation, it is the least tenable given the context of the passage and Paul's overall argument.
- *They are spiritual forces that temporarily have earthly dominion and continually conspire against man.* With strong and consistent Scriptural support, particularly in Paul's writings, it becomes clear that the conflict being addressed is larger and more dramatic than what may appear on the surface. Humanity exists in a world that is irreparably broken, marred by sin. It is a domain that has been given over for a time to Satan (called "the god of this age [[2 Cor. 4:4](#)]) and his fallen angelic brethren who are identified as "principalities" and "powers," "rulers of this age," and "enemies of God" (cf. [Eph. 2:2](#), [Rom. 8:38](#), [1 Cor. 2:6,8; 15:24,26](#)). It is worth noting that these forces are not impish creatures with horns and pitched forks, or even frightening fanged, winged behemoths as represented in modern media, but deceiving spirits masquerading as angels of light (cf. [2 Cor. 11:14](#)). It is reasonably concluded that throughout the ages, mankind is indeed engaged in spiritual warfare. Apart from faith, therefore, man is enslaved to the earthly powers and principalities, and the law is the barking dog given by God to bring him to the end of himself that he may come to God by faith.

4

But when the fullness of time had come,

Just as a child's "fullness of time" arrives when he moves from "minority" to "majority," the time of history itself came to fullness in the progression of God's sovereign will.

The phrase itself is pregnant with meaning. Recall that Paul was addressing an audience that was attempting to reconcile the theology, laws, and promises of the Old Testament with the person of Jesus and the revelation of Him as the Messiah, the Savior, and even the incarnate God Almighty. Part of this is an understanding that time as it is experienced is a finite expression of reality that has an endpoint that corresponds with its inauguration. Through the Prophet Daniel, God had revealed that a predetermined sequence of events in time would have to pass prior to the arrival of Messiah (cf. [Dan. 9:24](#)). What a glorious indication of the purpose, intent, and unalterable sovereignty of God in accomplishing His purpose. Even time itself is a tool in the hand of God to fulfill the designs of His initiative.

God sent forth his Son,

As clear and succinct articulation of the Gospel that can be found, Paul profoundly links the greatest work of God with the apex of history. There is no other who fits this description than Jesus, and in the presentation of Jesus as God's Son, there is the accompanying understanding of His identity as Christ, as divine, and as eternal. As much, Jesus' incarnation is a predetermined event and not a random circumstance or coincidental happening. With parabolic teaching, identified Himself as the beloved son ([Mark 12:1-11](#)), and earlier revealed Himself to have been sent by God ([Mark 9:37](#)). In juxtaposing the incarnation of Jesus with "the fullness of time," we see Jesus as He truly is - the eternal God who entered into the ordained drama of human history perfectly according to plan. It can now be fathomed because of this ultimate, timely self-revelation that God sent Himself to do His work.

born of woman,

Paul, in subtly direct fashion, affirms both the Virgin birth of Jesus as well as his full humanity.

born under the law,

As a fully human child, by law he was born a Jewish male under the parentage of Joseph and Mary. We know from the accounting of his childhood that He was raised as a Jew, taught to learn and adhere to the laws of the Torah and was subject to the ceremonies and traditions of the Jewish religion. Truly Jesus was treated as a slave even though He was Lord of all.

5**to redeem those who were under the law,**

Transitioning from the presentation of Jesus as Christ to the presentation of Him as Savior, Paul explains how Jesus, though under the law, He was not a slave to sin in the manner that impaired the rest of humanity. In this, He is uniquely fit to bring freedom to enslaved humanity. Jesus' unique identity as being fully God and fully man positions Him alone to totally identify our need and also to be the provision to satisfy it.

The concept of redemption is essential in the understanding of Jesus. He didn't come to exemplify obedience. He came to pay the price for humanity's sin debt. He came to bear the full brunt of the Father's wrath toward sin. He came to satisfy the obligation and in doing so, fully reconcile God and man. The work he voluntarily undertook offered no self-benefit, but instead would benefit those who were under the curse of the law. By Him alone the curse would be freed, the spiritually dead would find life.

so that we might receive adoption as sons.

While it would be easy to focus on the salvation offered by Jesus as "fire insurance," or more specifically a proactive determination to deliver the recipients of grace solely from a decidedly negative consequence, it would be tragically one-sided to do so. Not only are we saved *from* the curse, we are also saved *for* the purpose of adoption.

The motif of adoption was well-known to the Jews and Gentiles alike. The process of choosing a child and bestowing the full rights of family identification was common their cultures. It conveyed imagery of election, grace, provision, and full inclusion.

6**And because you are sons,**

Paul shifts from third-person to second-person to include his audience as being among those who have been chosen by God to be adopted as children. Paul is intentional to shift the paradigm of the

Galatians from being citizens under the judiciary of God to identifying as the children of God. This is not a conditional hypothetical, but instead an inarguable certainty - the guaranteed effect of the redemption of Jesus upon which their faith is established.

God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

It has been fervently debated that this verse expresses a causality between the adoption and the bestowing of the Spirit. Yet, rather than focusing on the chicken-or-the-egg distraction about whether Sonship precedes the Spirit or the Spirit precedes Sonship, it is perhaps better understood as them being two sides of the same reality. The Spirit is the sign of Sonship, and Sonship is the familial articulation explaining the presence of the Spirit. One cannot be experienced nor expressed without the other (cf. [Rom. 8:15-16](#)). It is attributable to the Spirit of God that we cry out to Him as a child crying out to his Father. All legal hindrances have been overcome. All judicial requirements have been satisfied. God's Spirit affirms the adoption, and by His Spirit we totally identify as His children.

7

So you are no longer a slave, but a son

"So" is rendered "therefore" in other translations. It is Paul's intent to communicate a direct link - a summation of theology - established in the Trinitarian declaration of the previous first. Through belief in the Father who adopts, the Son whose sacrifice makes adoption possible, and the Spirit who validates and affirms the adoption, you are no longer a slave, but a son.

and if a son, then an heir through God.

Because the Christ-follower is a child of God, adopted by grace on the basis of faith upon the effective finished work of Jesus, the believer is no longer a minor under the guardianship/condemnation of the law. He is no longer a minor, but a free heir of the Father in good standing, now and forevermore.

Galatians: The Gospel for Everyday Life

Galatians 4:1-7 - Stuck!

Small Group Leader Guide

Start the conversation

At what age can a person drive legally? Drink alcoholic beverages? vote? serve in the military? get married?

How does a person's relationship with the law change once they pass that age of majority?

Living Under Guardianship (Galatians 4:1-2)

What does it mean to read here that while underage, the heir is the same as the slave?

Verse 1 declares that you, as an heir, own the whole estate. What does that mean?

Verse 2 explains that until the day of maturity, the Christian experience is identifiable with the cultural experience of being under the guardianship appointed by the Father. What does this mean to you as a child of your heavenly Father?

Overcoming the Elemental Forces (Galatians 4:3-5)

What do you think of when you read about the "elemental forces" that controlled you prior to faith?

What does it mean to you that Jesus, born of a woman, came at the set time?

What matters of significance do the details of Jesus' birth reveal in verse 4?

What does verse 5 explain as why Jesus came?

The Spirit of Adoption (Read Galatians 4:6-7)

What is important, in the revealed evidence of your grace gift of adoption in God's family, according to verse 6?

After read verse 7, re-read verses 1 and 2. How does your understanding of this passage change your appreciation or understanding of the law, and your relation to it as a child of

God?

Continue in Grace - Living Galatians 4:1-7 in the Week ahead

Day 1

Today, take inventory of all that God has promised you by faith in Jesus. Count your blessings and praise Him for His generosity expressed to you!

Day 2

Verse 2 reminds us to the sovereignty of God. Nothing occurs without God's approval. Even the things we don't understand or readily recognize as good are in fact good in God's economy. Today, trust God's sovereignty for the circumstances in your life. Ask God to remind you of His good will as you walk by faith through your challenges and opportunities today.

Day 3

Spiritual warfare is an invisible reality with tangible outcomes. Right now, battles are being undertaken with you in the crosshairs. In Jesus, your identity is secure. Determine to engage in the battle today, putting on your armor, taking up your spiritual weapons, and advance by faith as you believe your beliefs and doubt your doubts..

Day 4

The idea of redemption is understood to provide the established cost or value of something else. The established cost of your efforts is death. Jesus paid that expense so you do not have to do so yourself. In an act of worship today, pay the cost of someone else today...at a restaurant, at the coffee shop, at the cleaners. Do this act in humble anonymity, expressing gratitude to God for paying the cost you cannot pay.

Day 5

Jesus was sent by God, born of a woman under the law to redeem us who were in our flesh under the law. This redemption is available to any who call upon the name of the Lord to be saved. Today, pray for your unbelieving friends and family, and ask God to give you the courage to invite them to worship or to come to an upcoming outreach event, so their own bridge to faith may continue to grow.

Day 6

In North America, fatherlessness is epidemic. Pray for our fatherless children that they may know their heavenly Father's love. Pray for our churches and our missionaries to effectively reach the generations of fatherless children with the Father's Gospel of Grace, so they might receive the Spirit of God who cries, "Abba, Father!"

Family Talk

Read Galatians 4:1-7.

Remind everyone around the table that last week, you discussed the traffic laws and how those laws are good and just, even when we are punished for breaking them. Ask, "How old do you have to be to legally drive?" (16)

Ask about other things that are illegal until a certain age is reached (voting, military service, becoming President). Discuss why these age restrictions exist. Ask, "Are we free from the law once

we reach a certain age?" (No).

Transition the conversation to the Scripture. Explain how when Jesus came, He obeyed every law perfectly and in doing so, died for our inability to obey perfectly. Help others understand that Jesus's coming was the "majority" (or coming of age) for all of human history. Now that Jesus had come, the law still existed, but those who trust in Jesus are no longer condemned by the law (or will be punished for breaking the law), but are now approved by God and can rejoice in the goodness of the law because it shows how holy and good God is.

Close by discussing how God's Holy Spirit is the means by which we are able to identify God as our Father. Close in prayer thanking God for His Spirit who affirms our adoption in Jesus and praising the Father for His good laws that glorify His holy righteousness.

The following pages
are for small group leaders.

Galatians: The Gospel for Everyday Life

Galatians 4:1-7 - Stuck!

Small Group Leader Guide

Prepare: Things to do before your small group convenes

- **Consider** the age of majority in the USA. There are actually several different ages of majority, some of which are recognized at a state level and others which are recognized nationally. Think of the implications of the laws placed upon minors versus adults. Think through the freedoms that adults experience. **Prepare** your heart to lead this conversation.
- **Review** Galatians 4:1-7 to review the content of the biblical focus. **Invite** God to speak to you with a fresh application of His timeless truth. **Ask** God to open your eyes to see opportunity to share His love and truth with others, that you might also live by faith. **Submit** your heart to God's conviction, that you may be exhorted to experience anew the timely activity of God's Holy Spirit in your life.
- **Read** the provided [commentary on Galatians](#) 4:1-7. **Preview** this material and engage with God's Spirit as He guides your study.
- **Pray** for your small group members by name, asking God to reveal a meaningful appreciation for their part in the family of God. **Seek** God's wisdom in leading your small group to apply God's word to their lives. **Commit** yourself to the Lord, that you would live what you teach.

To The Point - What to impart to your small group

Key Verse: Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, [c] Father." (Galatians 4:6, ESV)

Objectives: Through your time exploring this passage, your small group members will:

Understand the guardianship function of the law.

Discuss the implications of Jesus' incarnation in accomplishing salvation.

Apply the biblical truths of freedom and inheritance in life, as evidenced by God's indwelling Spirit.

Leader Guide Key:

Blue - hyperlinks to other resources

Red - Reading prompts

Green - Leader headers and *sample responses to questions*

Encounter: A suggested plan for your small group experience

Start the conversation

At what age can a person drive legally? Drink alcoholic beverages? vote? serve in the military? get married?

The legal driving age is 16 in most states, drinking alcohol age is 21, voting is 18, military service is 18. Marriage ages vary from state to state?

How does a person's relationship with the law change once they pass that age of majority?

The person is no longer prohibited by the law, but guided by it. They are not above the law even though they are still "legal." They have more freedom than when the law was

their guardian as a minor.

Say

As we transition into chapter 4, Paul has made this definitive statement that followers of Jesus are indeed heirs of God, through faith in the promise given to Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus. In this passage we're going to explore together, Paul now builds upon his assurance of promise to now help the Galatians understand how to relate to the law as free heirs in Jesus.

Open in prayer for your time together.

Living Under Guardianship (Galatians 4:1-2)

Say

It's important to understand that Paul is now talking to the Galatian people in the mindset that they have heard and understand that they are free in Jesus. So we need to interpret this passage in that same mindset.

Ask

What does it mean to read here that while underage, the heir is the same as the slave?

Even though the person's real, spiritual identity is affirmed as an heir to God, until their faith is fulfilled, they will still live like a slave. This means that even though from God's perspective they own everything, their liberties are restricted until the experience where they pass from faith to fulfillment. This practically means that sin still has a presence in and an effect on the flesh, but it no longer possesses the power to condemn.

Verse 1 declares that you, as an heir, own the whole estate. What does that mean?

As the heir of God, He has promised all things to His children. The new heaven, the new earth, the eternal, unhindered fellowship with God are yours. This is your inheritance! Don't lose sight of your promise, just because now you continue to live comparatively like a slave.

Verse 2 explains that until the day of maturity, the Christian experience is identifiable with the cultural experience of being under the guardianship appointed by the Father. What does this mean to you as a child of your heavenly Father?

We can remember the earlier pictures of the law as a barking dog and as a strict warden continually reminding the unbeliever of the hopelessness in sin. Now, though, because the person is an heir, the law is a guardian and a mentor that highlights the glory of God, the beauty of God's holiness, and the goodness of God's order (all of which are magnified in God's law).

Overcoming the Elemental Forces (Galatians 4:3-5)

Ask

What do you think of when you read about the "elemental forces" that controlled you prior to faith?

While there is much discussion about what is meant by this term, the most reasonable and widely accepted is the idea that Paul is referring to the reality that because we are born in sin, under the law (and accordingly born to die), we are subject to the temporary authority of the fallen spiritual beings, even as we exist upon an earth that has been condemned to eventual destruction in the judgment of God. This signifies that humans as spiritual beings are unavoidably (and sadly often unwittingly) engaged in spiritual warfare.

What does it mean to you that Jesus, born of a woman, came at the set time?

Just as each person reaches "majority" in their physical life, and as Christians do when their faith is fulfilled, history itself reached "majority," the time where God's purpose for the provided law was fulfilled. The incarnation of Jesus signified this "maturity moment" of human history where everything changed, in perfect compliance with God's sovereignty.

What matters of significance do the details of Jesus' birth reveal in verse 4?

That God sent his son reveals that Jesus is the son of God, that He is God's plan to rescue the world, and that salvation (and grace and promise) are all intentional blessings bestowed by God. That Jesus is described as being born of a woman is an affirmation of his humanity. That He is not described as being born of a man is a proclamation of His divinity. The detail that Jesus was born under the law reveals that He did not come to do away with the law but to fulfill it. He is not apart from the law

What does verse 5 explain as why Jesus came?

Jesus came to redeem (pay the sin debt) for those under (condemned by) the law. In doing this, his substitutionary death makes righteous those who trust God through faith in Jesus. This was Jesus' purpose....not merely to give a good example, or to be kind to people, but to redeem those under the law and in doing so, providing an identity of adoption into the family of Jesus

The Spirit of Adoption (Read Galatians 4:6-7)

Ask

What is important, in the revealed evidence of your grace gift of adoption in God's family, according to verse 6?

*It is important to see that God sent His Spirit as evidence of adoption to indwell His children. His Spirit was sent **because** of their identity as sons, not to accomplish this identification restoration. This means salvation was accomplished on the cross and it experienced at the moment of faith. The Spirit's instantaneous indwelling presence is the sealing, guaranteeing affirmation of what God has accomplished. It is important to know that God's Spirit personally abides in our inner being, regenerating us and making us a new creation. It is important to see that God's Spirit cries out, "Abba, Father," which reveals that we are no longer under God's judgment, but that we are in God's favor as His children. By His power, by His grace, by His provision, we can now rightly call Almighty God our beloved Father!*

Ask

After read verse 7, re-read verses 1 and 2. How does your understanding of this passage change your appreciation or understanding of the law, and your relation to it as a child of God?

While answers may vary, it is important to emphasize that we are children of God who has given us the Spirit of adoption. As such, we are the owners of everything that is our Father's! Until the time where our faith in this promise is fulfilled, we live under the guardianship and tutelage of the law that draws us closer to God and increases our love, understanding, and devotion to God who is holy, right, pure, and just (as exemplified in His law).

Say

We are beginning to see the goodness of the law because we are increasing in our understanding of how we truly relate to the law. It is impossible to relate to the law in this way apart from the Spirit, who is given by the Father to those who are His. May we this week find new opportunities to rejoice in His law, see His glory revealed through it, and celebrate the grace of God that frees us from its condemnation.

Let's close in prayer:

Invite the group to pray for one another. Pray over any needs or issues that were shared in your time together. Pray over the content discussed in your small group, highlighting the aspects that God's Spirit revealed to your group as important.

Encourage your group to use the "Continue in grace" resources (below and on the Group Members Page) on their own or with their family, to extend the small group experience into the week. Confirm your plans for your next gathering!

Continue in Grace - Living Galatians 4:1-7 in the Week ahead

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