



“Children of God”

Philemon 1:10–21; Galatians 3:23–4:7 (NRSV)

Do we truly grasp that we are brothers and sisters in Christ?

You could hardly pick a better place to begin understanding Paul’s theology than with his letter to a man named Philemon about a slave, Onesimus. We wish we knew more about the occasion for the letter’s writing, but we know enough to grasp that in this letter, we see God’s love lived out. It seems that

Onesimus is a slave belonging to Philemon but has been with Paul for a while. A runaway? Perhaps. But whatever the reason, Paul is sending this slave back to his owner, not as a slave but as a brother. Indeed, Paul asks Philemon (though Paul says he could command it!) to receive Onesimus as he would Paul. All three are now family. The slave and the master are now brothers in Christ, and nothing can be as it was.

In a world consumed with class distinctions, in which slavery was ever-present, woven throughout all levels and activities of society, Paul was a revolutionary. Receive a runaway slave as you would the great Paul? It wouldn’t be the world’s way, but it is Jesus’ way.

In his letter to the believers in Galatia, Paul lays out some theology that is then lived out in the letter to Philemon. The believers are, to a person, heirs in Christ, adopted brothers and sisters in Christ.

Heirs of the inheritance

These new Christians in Galatia (after all, Christianity was all new at the time) don’t really grasp the work that God has done in them. Paul urges them to remember the gifts that God bestowed on them, beginning with the Holy Spirit. Paul’s message to them is, “You are new creations; now act like it!”

In today’s passage from the letter, he uses the analogy of minors, heirs, and inheritance to make his point. In chapter 3 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses two images to talk about the law and its place prior to Jesus. First, he depicts the law as a jailor, who locked up the prisoners and kept guard over them until Jesus came to liberate them. Paul also pictures the law as a custodian, who took care of God’s children, showed them how to live, and disciplined them.¹ Similar to a nanny.

Moving into chapter 4, Paul mixes two metaphors. Paul begins with the image of an heir. Then, as now, fathers (parents) would set up estates for their children and appoint guardians or trustees who would control the estate until the children had come of age. Unlike today, under Roman law children with a guardian had the legal status of a slave. In Paul’s metaphor, it is God the Parent who has set up the estate. The law is the guardian. It is all humanity who has lived as minors, as slaves even, under the guardianship of the law,² bound to the “elemental spirits of the earth” (v. 3).

But . . . in an act of cosmic significance, God has intervened . . . the time has been fulfilled (Mark 1:14) . . . the minors have become of age . . . the slaves have been freed. How could this be? Paul explains to the Galatians that God has sent his own son -- quite human (born of a woman) and quite Jewish (born under the law) -- who has “redeemed”³ humanity, so that everyone might be adopted as God’s children. Here, Paul introduces his

¹ From C.B. Cousar’s commentary on Galatians in the *Interpretation series*

² There is a larger sense of the law as well. Paul understood that the essence of the law is written on the hearts of all people; that our consciences tell us to love the Creator and one another (see Romans 1:18-32). Thus, in the larger sense, Paul can speak of all humans being slaves under the law.

³ In the Old Testament, there were kinsmen redeemers who would buy back relatives from debt and slavery. The Lord God Almighty is portrayed as the redeemer of Israel, delivering Israel from its enemies. Jesus Christ is never referred to as the Redeemer. Instead,

second metaphor, that of adoption. This becomes a little clearer when we remember that Paul is writing to Christians who had not been Jewish; the adoption language would have been especially meaningful for them – as it is for us. Jewish-Christians would have seen themselves as having received their inheritance by birth. But Paul makes clear that Gentile-Christians could claim adoption into God’s family . . . from a slave to a child (adopted or otherwise) to an heir. Whether born a daughter or adopted as a daughter, Paul sees no distinction before God. By sending his Son to free us from our prison, God has brought both Jew and Gentile into his newly-created family.

Experiencing Our Adoption

This “legal” adoption is not the end of Paul’s story. God sent his Holy Spirit to us as the sign and pledge of our adoption into God’s family. As Cousar writes, “Just as an orphan taken into the home of foster parents may initially mistrust or at least wonder about the reception given by the new parents and may require some gesture to get over the feelings of being an outsider, so God’s adopted children move about in fear until the Spirit operates at a deep level ‘in our hearts’ to corroborate not once by repeatedly the reality of the Father’s love.” Clearly, we are to understand and find great joy in the intimate relationship we enjoy with God.

Yes, God’s children and heirs

So . . . we *are* in direct relationship with God. We *are* dressed in the adult wardrobe of faith. We *are* in Christ’s family. We *are* the descendants of Abraham. We *are* the adult heirs of God, sisters and brothers, and the inheritance due God’s heirs is ours. John Stott helps us to understand the implications of being heirs to the promise made to Abraham.⁴

We have seen that in Christ we belong to God and to each other. In Christ we also belong to Abraham. We take our place in the noble historical succession of faith, whose outstanding representatives are listed in Hebrews 11. No longer do we feel ourselves to be waifs and strays, without any significance in history, or bits of useless flotsam drifting on the tide of time. Instead, we find our place in the unfolding purpose of God. We are the spiritual seed of our father Abraham, who lived and died 4,000 years ago, for in Christ we have become heirs of the promise which God made to him.

These, then, are the results of being ‘in Christ’, and they speak with powerful relevance to us today. For our generation is busy developing a philosophy of meaninglessness. It is fashionable nowadays to believe (or to say you believe) that life has no meaning, no purpose. There are many who admit that they have nothing to live for. They do not feel that they belong anywhere, or, if they belong, it is to the group known as ‘the unattached’. They class themselves as ‘outsiders’, ‘misfits’. They are without anchor, security or home. In biblical language, they are ‘lost’.

To such people comes the promise that in Christ we find ourselves. The unattached become attached. They find their place in eternity (related first and foremost to God as His sons and daughters), in society (related to each other as brothers and sisters in the same family) and in history (related also to the succession of God’s people down the ages). This is a three-dimensional attachment which we gain when we are in Christ—in height, breadth and length. It is an attachment in ‘height’ through reconciliation to the God who, although radical theologians repudiate the concept and we must be careful how we interpret it, is a God ‘above’ us, transcendent over the universe He has made. Next, it is an attachment in ‘breadth’, since in Christ we are united to all other believers throughout the world. Thirdly, it is an attachment in ‘length’, as we join the long, long line of believers throughout the whole course of time.

Jesus is the means of our redemption from sin. The biblical language of redemption is all bound up with slavery and freedom, bondage, and deliverance.

⁴ Stott, J. R. W. (1986). *The message of Galatians: Only one way* (pp. 101–102). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. The deity pronouns are the author’s.

Further, it is not that we are *going* to be heirs, we are heirs *now* -- *already*. We may not act like God's heirs much of the time, but that is who we are. If I had to act like an heir to be an heir . . . well, let's just say that the inheritance would forever elude my grasp.

Paul's point in this passage is larger than just the true identity of the Galatian Christians. He reminds them of their own experience of God's Spirit, which is the evidence and guarantee of their new life in Christ.

Nonetheless, many of them still look to the keeping of the Jewish law as the mark of their salvation. They don't fully realize that the arrival of Jesus Christ freed them from the curse of needing to keep a law that they could not keep. Because God gave them the Law, they know sin in a way that other peoples do not.

In Christ, who was himself born under this nanny, the Law, so that he could free us from the custodian's care, we, in Peterson's graceful paraphrase, "experience our rightful heritage." And our heritage is that we are new creations, made alive in Christ. As heirs, we have a new status: we are God's children, sisters and brothers.

Daily Bible Readings

More on the Family of Christ

Monday	Philemon 1-25	The whole of the letter
Tuesday	Acts 2:1-14	The new family is born
Wednesday	Acts 2:43-47, 4:32-37	The new family begins to live as a family
Thursday	Romans 12:1-8	The family is diverse
Friday	1 Corinthians 12	God has given the diverse family many gifts for the building up of the family.
Saturday	1 Corinthians 15:12-34	One day, the entire family will be resurrected so they can enjoy God and one another for eternity.