

Galatians Chapter 4

The Adoption Of Sons - Galatians 4:1-11

Probably no richer word exists in the New Testament regarding our salvation than adoption. This word encompasses a wide range of truth, extending from our unredeemed state prior to salvation all the way to future glorification. The word itself, *hiousthesis*, comes from two Greek words, *hiou*, son, and *thesia*, to place, hence “to place a son.”

This definition may be understood by examining the Roman concept of adoption. According to Roman law, a father had total control over the lives of his entire family. This was called *pater potestis* or the “power of the father.” In exercising this authority, a father may find that all of his own sons were unacceptable as his heirs. In that case, the father would be able to “adopt” a son which would take precedence over his own sons in regard to the inheritance, or make the adopted son a co-heir with his own sons. Therefore we see that the word “adoption” is not the taking of some waif off of the street, but a careful selecting and choosing of someone to be the inheritor of an estate. Once such a son was found, the following conditions applied to his adoption:

- 1) All of his past debts were canceled. His past life was erased to the extent that it appeared as if he had just been born.
- 2) Depending on the choice of the father, he would be made the sole heir of the estate, or a co-heir of the estate.
- 3) He would be given a new name and made a full member of the family with all of its privileges and responsibilities.
- 4) The contract was witnessed by seven men to insure that no later dispute would arise regarding the adoption.

As we can see, this is a beautiful picture of what God has done for us. He has adopted us into his family, canceled our past debt of sin, and made us an eternal co-heir with Christ. The Holy Spirit is our witness.

Views Of Salvation

Justification pictures our salvation in terms of a law court and a judge.

Redemption pictures our salvation in terms of a slave market and freedom.

Reconciliation pictures our salvation in terms of an ambassador and peace.

Forgiveness pictures our salvation in terms of a debt and a payment.

Adoption pictures our salvation in terms of a father and a family.

Preparation - Galatians 4:1-3

Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:

Drawing from Roman and Jewish customs, Paul paints a picture of adoption in these first few verses of Galatians four that continue the concept he started in Galatians three. Under Roman and Jewish customs, there was a clear demarcation between boyhood and manhood. We have essentially lost that today. The transition for the modern American boy is somewhere between the ages of ten and eighteen. About the only significant dates for young adults today are sixteen, when they can drive, eighteen, when they can vote, and twenty-one, when they can drink alcoholic beverages legally.

This was not so for the Jewish or Roman boy. In Rome, a boy from the average wealthy family was subjected to the care of slaves who would be responsible for his training and education. While under their tutelage, the boy was in fact a “slave to the slaves.” He could do nothing by himself unless first asking for permission. This continued until the time set by the father in which he would make the transition from boyhood to adulthood.

The same held true for the Jewish boy. While he was young, he was under the care of others who watched out for him and educated him. When he reached the age of twelve, actually, the first Sabbath after his twelfth birthday, he would go through the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. After that he was considered an adult in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of the nation.

Paul draws on these customs to talk about existence under the law. The law was an unrelenting taskmaster, or schoolmaster, that never let up for one moment. While under the law, although we were heirs of all, we were still treated as slaves. We were in bondage to the requirements and strictures of the law until the time appointed by God when we have our own spiritual “Bar Mitzvah” and become sons instead of slaves.

In fact, the phrase “elemental things” is used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to elemental religious rituals. In Galatians 4:9 it clearly refers to the Jewish religious rituals and in Colossians 2:8 it refers to the elements of worldly philosophy and wisdom. Elemental rituals have as their basis one common thread, and that is human achievement. Religious rituals, by definition, are performed in order to gain the approval or appeasement of a deity, and as such, are useless in true Christianity, a religion of divine accomplishment.

Realization - Galatians 4:4-11**The Means of Adoption - Galatians 4:4-5**

But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

How was our adoption as sons accomplished? We find the answer here. It is accomplished solely by the completed work of Christ on the cross. His life, death, and resurrection provide the only basis whereby God can forgive sins and turn enemies into sons. Without Christ’s payment for sin, sonship would be an impossibility.

There is so much theology in these two verses that in order to adequately deal with the theology we would have to write pages and pages. Since this is beyond the scope of what we are trying to accomplish with this short commentary, we only offer the following main points:

The Timing

Christ's coming was at the precise moment in God's redemptive plan that God had determined before the foundation of the world. Although there were many things that went into this, Christ's coming was not a moment too soon or a moment too late. It was exactly right.

Religiously, the time was right for Christ's coming because the Jews had returned from Babylon where their idolatry was firmly and finally dealt with. Politically the *pax romana* had been a reality for some time which provided for economic and political stability. Culturally, the time was right because the Greek language had been made the *lingua franca* of the known world. Geographically the time was right because Rome had built a system of roads and communication that enhanced the rapid growth of the gospel throughout the Roman world in a few short years.

God Sent Forth His Son Made Of A Woman

Secondly, we find that God sent forth Christ made of a woman. We find here the mystery of the *hypostatic union*. Christ was deity in the sense that he was 100% God, and Christ was human in the sense that he was 100% man. That does not add up to 200%, nor does it infer an unnatural mixing of the divine and human. The truth of Christ's two natures is that he is both God and man at the same time.

Christ becoming human was a requirement if he was to be our Savior. If he was not perfect man, then he could not redeem man. If he was not God in the flesh, then he could not have lived a perfectly righteous life. Both aspects were required, and both were present in Christ.

Made Under The Law To Redeem Those That Were Under The Law

Christ was not only made a man, but he was placed under the same requirements of the law as every other man who has ever existed. By law, Paul is referring to the condemnatory aspects of God's law as revealed in Ezekiel 18:3, "*The soul that sinneth, it shall die.*" Christ had to live a perfect life in order to become the perfect substitute. He did not live above the law, nor did he live in defiance of the law. He lived in perfect obedience to the law so that one day he could become the savior and redeem man from the curse of the law, which is spiritual death.

That We Might Receive The Adoption Of Sons

What did Christ's death provide? It provided adoption as God's sons. Without Christ's payment for our sins, God could never forgive us our sins and redeem us from the curse of the law, which is an absolute curse. His justice would have demanded eternal death. Since Christ took our place, and in effect suffered the wrath of God on our behalf, we can be adopted by God as his sons.

The Meaning of Adoption - Galatians 4:6-7

And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

Being a son of God gives one some infinite privileges. Not only have we been set free from the curse of the law which demands spiritual and eternal death, but we have been placed in a position of favor before God. We are not only returned to our state of innocence before God, but we are further given a place of honor and privilege. We see several of these privileges in these two verses.

Interestingly, these two verses are expanded on in some detail in Romans 8:11-17. For example, in these two verses we read that we can call the Father “daddy” which is echoed in Romans 8:15-16. We are told that we are now sons of God as we read in Romans 8:14. We are also told that we are heirs of God, as Paul tells in Romans 8:17.

The Holy Spirit

The first great privilege that is ours is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christ promised his disciples in the upper room that he would send another Comforter who would abide with them forever (John 16). This Comforter came in Acts 2 at Pentecost and the Church was born. From that time onward, those who believe in Christ are given the indwelling Holy Spirit as the *arrabon*, or down payment that guarantees our future glorification with Christ (Ephesians 1). In fact, Paul tells us in Romans 8:9 that “if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.” It is not possible for a person to be a believer without the indwelling Spirit.

The Ministries Of The Holy Spirit To The Believer

1. **The Holy Spirit reveals divine truth to the believer - 1 Corinthians 2:11-14.**
2. **The Holy Spirit regenerates the believer - Titus 3:5; John 3:3-7; 1 Peter 1:23.**
3. **The Holy Spirit baptizes the believer into the body of Christ - 1 Corinthians 12:13.**
4. **The Holy Spirit indwells the believer - John 14:20; 1 Corinthians 2:12; 6:19; John 7:37-39.**
5. **The Holy Spirit seals the believer - Ephesians 1:13; 4:30.**
6. **The Holy Spirit fills the believer - Acts 2:4; Ephesians 5:18.**
7. **The Holy Spirit prays for the believer - Romans 8:26.**
8. **The Holy Spirit guides the believer into all truth - John 16:13, 1 John 2:20.**
9. **The Holy Spirit empowers the believer for service - Acts 1:8.**
10. **The Holy Spirit reveals God’s love in our hearts - Romans 5:5.**
11. **The Holy Spirit is the source of assurance - Romans 8:16.**
12. **The Holy Spirit brings freedom and liberty from the law - Romans 8:2.**
13. **The Holy Spirit grants and empowers spiritual gifts - 1 Corinthians 12.**
14. **The Holy Spirit brings for fruit in the believer’s life - Galatians 5:22-23.**

Divine Sonship

The second great privilege is divine sonship. Although this is inherent in the fact that we are adopted, nevertheless there is a richness here that is unfathomable. This is because we are not only made God's son in the judicial, or forensic sense, but we are made God's son in the relational or intimate sense. The word "Abba", as used here, is the Aramaic diminutive "daddy." God is not only our Father in the legal sense, but in the intimate, relational sense. The way in which this is accomplished is by the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:15-16).

Heirs of God

Our third great privilege mentioned in these two verses is our divine inheritance. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3:4 that we have "an inheritance, incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away." In Romans 8:17 we are told that we are "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ." Because of our divine sonship, we inherit that which Christ inherits, which is everything. In heaven there will be no private property.

The Magnificent Freedom of Adoption - Galatians 4:8-11

Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.

Having just talked about the great freedom that is ours as sons of God, Paul now turns back to the Galatian believers and asks them in amazement why they would ever want to go back to the slavery of the law. It is as though a man who had just been made heir to a kingdom decided that he was better off grinding flour in a slave mill. It is like Joseph who had just been made the second ruler of the kingdom of Egypt declining and saying he would rather go back into prison.

Paul points out that before the Galatian believers knew God, they were slaves to gods that were no gods at all. The Gentile Galatian believers were slaves to the Roman gods who demanded appeasement. The Jewish Galatian believers were slaves to the Mosaic law with all of its rituals and rites. When they came to know Christ, they were freed from the bondage of idols and an unattainable standard and were made sons of God. Why would they ever now want to go back and live in bondage?

Note that the law and rituals are described as the "weak and beggarly elements." The law can never bring salvation or assurance of peace with God, it can only bring a fearful looking forward to judgment. In fact Paul asserts that the Galatian believers were observing days, and months, and times, and years. This is a reference to the Sabbath laws and feasts of the Old Covenant. Paul's great fear is that the Galatian believers are allowing themselves to be taken back into a religion of bondage and human achievement, and as such Paul is fearful that he labored in vain among them.

Until Christ Be Formed - Galatians 4:12-20

Paul's appeal now turns from that of a theological treatise to a personal request. He moves from the doctrinal aspects of freedom in Christ to a personal appeal for the Galatian believers to return to the freedom they had in Christ before being led astray.

Paul's Appeal to the Galatians - Galatians 4:12a

Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are:

Paul begs the Galatian believers to become as he is, free in Christ. Probably no other Apostle more passionately proclaimed and lived the freedom we have in Christ than Paul. He asks the Galatian believers to remember back to the time he was among them, when he first introduced them to the liberty they have in Christ. Just as he is, so they are to become, because they remember that just as they were as Jews, so Paul became a Jew to minister to them.

Paul's Memory of the Galatians - Galatians 4:12b-16

ye have not injured me at all. Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me. Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?

Paul continues his appeal to the Galatian believers by asking them to think back to the time he first arrived and proclaimed the Gospel to them. He reminds them that he came to preach to them it was with a great deal of personal difficulty. We do not know exactly what this difficulty was, but evidently it was some physical ailment or disease. The area south of Galatia on the Mediterranean Sea was a breeding ground for many infectious diseases, one of the most common being malaria. Perhaps Paul contracted malaria as he was traveling through Pamphylia and Phrygia to get to Galatia, or perhaps his problem was an eye disease as many Bible commentators believe. In any case, Paul says that his arrival was nothing to brag about in human terms, but that whatever he suffered was evident to all who saw him.

Nevertheless, the Galatian believers did not concentrate on Paul's physical ailment or problem, but rather received him as an angel sent from God. In fact, the Galatian believers received him happily (blessedness is from *makarismos*, which indicates a feeling of joy or contentedness). They received him so happily, in fact, that if they could they would have plucked out their eyes and given them to Paul. Perhaps this is in reference to an eye disease that Paul had, or it may have just been a common expression in those days. In any case, the Galatian believers were overjoyed to hear the message that Paul gave.

However, something has happened. The Judaizers have arrived. The joy that the Galatian believers once had regarding Paul has now been replaced with feelings of animosity and mistrust. They were in danger of defecting from the truth proclaimed by Paul into the error proclaimed by the Judaizers, and as such Paul was deeply concerned. In fact, he asks the Galatian believers if he had become their enemy because he told them the truth. The implied answer is a "yes."

Paul's Warning to the Galatians - Galatians 4:17-18

They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them. But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you.

Paul's appeal turns to a warning in these two verses as he tells the Galatian believers of the true intentions of the Judaizers. He basically says in verse seventeen that the entire reason the Judaizers are treating the Galatian believers so well is so the Galatian believers will in turn respect and honor the Judaizers. In other words, the Judaizers were not really intent at all in

helping the Galatian believers, but were selfishly seeking glory and esteem for themselves. The word affect is a word that was often used to refer to a man who courted a woman. The Judaizers were courting the favor of the Galatian believers, but not with pure motives. They in fact wanted to shut out the Galatian believers from the grace of God and the freedom that was theirs in Christ.

Unlike the Judaizers, Paul was different. He not only was zealously seeking the Galatians for their own good, but he did it whether he was with them or not. In other words, Paul's motives regarding the Galatian believers were pure. He was not after them in order to aggrandize himself, or to make himself some great teacher or figure in their eyes, rather he wanted to see them experience the grace and freedom that is in Christ.

Paul's Desire for the Galatians - Galatians 4:19-20

My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you, I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you.

And just exactly what was Paul's great desire for the Galatian believers? It was that they have Christ formed in them. Paul was not interested in personal gain or fame. He did not care what the Galatian believers really thought of him. His only concern was that they experience the freedom of the Gospel, and not just the freedom of the Gospel, but all of the fullness that is ours as believers in Christ. The word for form is *morphoo*, and has the idea of essential form, not outward shape. It is the same word used in Romans 12:1-2 which speaks of the mind being transformed. This is a reference to Christlike character and godly attitudes. Paul's great desire for the Galatian believers, as it was for the other churches in which he ministered, was that the people experience all that was theirs in Christ.

However, Paul was at his wits end with the Galatian believers. The word for doubt is *aporemiai*, and means to be perplexed. Paul did not know what to do about the Galatian believers. He wanted to be with them so that he could change his tone of voice, but wasn't and as a result did not know how to deal with this situation. It is as though he is throwing his hands up into the air in consternation. He could not understand how a group of people who had started out so well were in the very process of returning to the bondage of the law.

Two Covenants - Law and Promise - Galatians 4:21-4:31

Paul continues his contrast of law and grace by going back to the Old Testament and drawing from the life of Abraham an illustration of his point. He uses the accounts of Ishmael and Isaac to show the difference between the bondage of the law and the freedom of grace.

One of the issues we must address before looking at this passage in detail is the word allegory. One of the popular methods of biblical interpretation that flourished in Paul's time and exists even until today is the allegorical approach. Basically, there are two major branches of biblical interpretation with many variations.

1. The Allegorical Approach

This approach to biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) states that the various accounts in the Bible have hidden meanings which the interpreter must find. For example, when the Bible says "Abraham, Abraham" it is really saying that Abraham was destined for an afterlife.¹ One modern pastor used the account of Nehemiah to teach the persistence

¹ See John F. MacArthur, *Galatians*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), pp. 122-23.

and use of tongues today, the mortar between the bricks being the gift of tongues. Another used the account of Jesus and the raising of Lazarus to teach the Rapture of the Church.

2. The Literal Approach

This approach, also called the Grammatico-Historical approach, treats the Bible literally. When it says that Job had 7,000 sheep, it means exactly that, and not that those sheep represented God's faithful people as asserted by Pope Gregory the Great. In fact, those who follow this rule of biblical interpretation say that if the "plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense." Of course, this does not mean that one ignores the obvious figures of speech that are in the Bible, such as simile, metaphor, exaggeration, etc. It just means that when these figures appear we treat them as figures of speech and as not some super-secret, mystical message known only to those lucky enough to dig out the truth.

The reason we mention these methods of biblical interpretation at this point is to underscore the danger of taking this account as a pure allegory. The word translated allegory is *allegoreo*. It really means "figure" and not allegory. Paul is not saying that the entire account of Isaac and Ishmael needs to be interpreted as he is doing so here, but that he is merely using this account as a figure or illustration of what he is trying to communicate. There was a real Isaac and a real Ishmael. Their life story is not found here in Galatians 4, but in Genesis 12-18.

Background - Galatians 4:21-24

Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.

Paul turns to those who want to go back under the bondage of the law and asks them if they really know what they are doing. He develops this by looking at the two sons of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael. The emphasis he focuses in on is not the fact of their common father, but on the fact of their different mothers.

If we remember the account in Genesis 12-18 of Isaac and Ishmael, we note that God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation when he was 75 years old (Genesis 12:1-4). In Genesis 15:1-6 God specifically promises Abraham a son that would come from his own loins. Then, in Genesis 16 we find out that Abraham and Sarai helped God out a bit by having Abraham father a child by Hagar, an Egyptian handmaiden. One of the customs in those days was that if a woman was childless, then she could give her slave or servant to her husband in order to bear a surrogate son for her so that she could provide her husband an heir. Both Abraham and Sarai thought they were helping God out, but in fact were operating in the flesh as Paul points out very clearly here. Whenever we give God a hand, we mess things up. Because of Abraham and Sarai's work in the flesh, we have inherited the Israeli-Arab conflict to this day, as Ishmael was the father of the Arab nations.

Hagar bore Ishmael to Abraham when he was 86 years old. Fourteen years later, when Abraham was 100, Abraham and Sarai bore Isaac as a fulfillment of God's promise. This is the son of the freewoman, and the child of promise.

Interpretation - Galatians 4:25-27

Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.

But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband.

Paul now extends the figure of Isaac and Ishmael to the two covenants. The first covenant, the Mosaic law which was given to Israel on Sinai in Arabia, is a covenant of bondage. It does not promise freedom, nor can it bring freedom. Paul equates Hagar (Agar), with Sinai, with the old covenant, and with the bondage of the law. He also equates this with the earthly Jerusalem, which was the center of the Jewish religion with all of its rites, rituals, and ceremonies.

In distinction to the bondage of the law and Sinai, there is the promise of God which is of the Jerusalem that is above. This new covenant, that of grace, brings freedom from the bondage of the law as well as the condemnation of the law. This freedom is so wonderful that Paul uses a quote from Isaiah 54:1 which originally was given to the Jews in Babylon but is used here to illustrate the rejoicing of Sarai when she bore the son of promise. She who was desolate is now the mother of the child of promise. And just as Sarai was the mother of Isaac, the child of the promise, so the new covenant is the spiritual mother of all who come to Christ by faith and inhabit the heavenly Jerusalem.

Application - Galatians 4:28-31

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.

Paul now applies the truth of his illustration to the matter at hand, namely the freedom that is ours in the New Covenant. Just as Isaac was the child of promise, and promise supersedes the law, so are we children of promise through Christ. Furthermore, just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac because of his jealousy, and even persecutes him today as evidenced by the Israeli-Arab conflict, so those who are under the law persecute those who are children of the promise. Paul's stiffest and most violent opposition was that of the religious Jews who wanted the bondage of the law more than they wanted freedom in Christ.

Paul appeals to the Galatian believers to cast out the bondwoman and her son. Just as Sarai cast Hagar and Ishmael out of her home, so Paul encourages the Galatian believers to cast the Judaizers out of their presence and return to the promise of liberty in Christ. Why? Because we are not children of the bondwoman, but children of the promise.