

Introduction

Here we are on the eve of another new year. Tomorrow is the first of January 2024. It is the 161st anniversary of a momentous day in American history. One hundred and sixty-one years ago, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the Confederate states "are, and henceforward shall be free." The stroke of a pen meant a sudden and complete change of status for more than 3.5 million enslaved people. In our text this morning, the Apostle Paul draws attention to another and far more momentous event by which slaves were granted freedom. Those freed slaves include all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. So let's turn to Galatians 4:1-7.

[Read text and Pray]

Paul concluded chapter 3 asserting that the law held us captive under itself and acted as a guardian until Christ came so that we might be justified by faith. And now since that has happened we are no longer under a guardian. But we are sons and heirs. Now in chapter 4, Paul is providing a further explanation of his previous remarks lest he be misunderstood. See how verse 1 of chapter 4 demonstrates it. "I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave though he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the time set by his father."

Paul makes reference to a practice in ancient society. Fathers set a date when their children would no longer be under guardians and managers. They would ascend from the level of "heir-in-waiting" to the level of actual ownership. When that date arrived, it was the fullness of the time. At that time, everything dramatically changed. There was an about-face, a quantum leap in the nature of the child's position. He went from being treated no differently than a slave to the position of owner and possessor as a son. Paul's focal message in these seven verses is of the three phases involved in this magnificent changeover. He sums it up down in verse 7, "So you are no longer a slave (phase 1), but a son (phase 2), and if a son, then an heir (phase 3). The initial phase is enslavement. The subsequent phase is sonship, and the final and resulting phase is the inheritance sons receive. So I want us to examine these three phases this morning. We start with the initial phase.

I. The Chains of Enslavement.

The heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved.

Paul uses the custom of the day to explain the spiritual bondage of those who have not yet embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our condition by nature is a condition of enslavement. Until the fullness of time, the child, though he is owner of everything is under guardians and managers. They are in charge of him and not vice versa. The guardians and managers tell him what to do. He is under their care and direction. Often these guardians were themselves slaves and they were entrusted with the responsibility to exercise oversight of the estate until the heir reached the appropriate age.

Says Paul, in the same way, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. Do you remember elementary school? Everyone had to quietly walk in a straight line. No talking. When I was in first grade, my teacher, Mrs. Ashworth was insisting that we walk quietly and orderly. I recall one day in particular on which I was not being quiet or orderly. In fact I was tickling

some kid. Mrs. Ashworth sent me back to the end of the line. And when I walked into the classroom, it seemed like everyone else was already in their seats. So in front of everybody, she wrapped her hands around my shoulders and shook me real good. She told me that tickling and talking were not allowed when we were walking through the hallway. I don't know that teachers do that kind of thing any more. But she sure got my attention and put in me the fear of Mrs. Ashworth and teachers everywhere. Mrs. Ashworth's treatment of me was like the law. It imprisons and holds captive. It treats people like slaves. It gets our attention to show us the dreaded consequences of disobedience.

Paul says, "we were enslaved by the elementary principles of the world." There is much discussion concerning to what exactly these "elementary principles of the world" refer. I think it best to see them as the means by which, under demonic influence, people think themselves somehow able to bring about their justification through their own personal goodness. Any such attempt, however, is enslaving. Our own efforts at keeping the law result in a burden we simply cannot bear. We don't want to be told what to do. We yearn for freedom, but we cannot free ourselves. We are enslaved to sin. We walk in the passions of our flesh, following the course of this world, the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. And yet continually we falsely hope we can be saved somehow if we will do this or do that.

When slaves were brought to the United States, a host of individuals were responsible for their miserable lot in life—to be the property of another human being, to be treated as less than a whole person, to be taken advantage of. They were taken from their homeland by coercion and brought as forced labor to work the fields in the New World. Similarly, the Israelites in Egypt were conscripted to be the labor force for Pharaoh's building projects. They were overworked and unappreciated. Their weary cries went up to God. Such is the spiritual state under the tyranny of the devil of those who have not come to Christ. They are enslaved and in the chains of sin. They need a kind of help they are unable to give themselves. They long for freedom and relief. And that is where we turn next.

Phase number two of the magnificent changeover is ...

II. The Freedom of Sonship.

We were enslaved, BUT when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to REDEEM those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

We looked at the details of the birth of the Son of God a couple weeks ago so we won't repeat them. But here is God's answer to the enslavement of human beings under the elementary principles of the world. He sends his Son. His mission is to redeem those under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons. We have three key ideas here—redemption, adoption, and sonship.

Redemption is the word that leads us to the concept of freedom. It arises from the context of slavery. There it was the purchase price of a slave's freedom. Being redeemed means our prior condition was one of slavery. However, in redemption the ransom is paid. Thinking back to the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, we might ask if there was a redemption price that was paid for the freeing of the Israelite nation. And the answer would be, "Yes." It was not a price paid to Pharaoh, for he did not own the Israelites. But the redemption price was paid to God in his work of redeeming his people. The redemption price was the Passover lamb. God required the death of all the firstborn in Egypt. But he instructed the Israelites to sacrifice a spotless lamb and paint its blood on the door posts of their dwellings. When the angel came to execute judgment, he would pass over

the homes where the blood was applied. The price of the lamb's blood was accepted in place of the death of the firstborn. And thus God's son, Israel was redeemed.

Passover foreshadows the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. He was the spotless lamb. On the cross his blood was shed as a ransom price for those enslaved in sin under the law. The blood of Jesus—his death—provides redemption for slaves reeling under the chains of enslavement to Satan, sin, and its curse. Ephesians 1:7 says, "In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." It is not fashionable to understand the atonement of Christ as involving a price to be paid in exchange for the freedom and deliverance of sinners. But the Bible will not let us get away from it. Redemption involves a price in exchange for the freedom of the slave. And the good news is that Jesus paid it all! The question is, "Are you trusting in Jesus and the price that he paid as your ransom for your redemption?" If not, you are still enslaved and will die enslaved if you will not repent and turn to Christ.

On the other hand, if you ARE trusting in Jesus, what a glorious reality, you are free! Free from the guilt of sin! Free from the penalty of sin! Free from the power of sin! Eventually we will be free from the presence of sin! We are also free from the law! But these are truths we will live out and rejoice to do so!

The second word here is the word adoption. "God sent forth his Son ... to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." We were bought out from under slavery to belong to God's family as adopted sons.

Could you stop and imagine what it might have been like when Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation? Let's imagine that you had been a slave for the whole of your life. Yet after all those years, here comes a government official spreading the word that all slaves are now free. Freedom is wonderful, but now, where do you belong? Where will you go? Where will you live? How will you get food? Before, your master looked out for you. Now that you are free, the world is suddenly dumped on your shoulders. Don't get me wrong. There can be no doubt that this newfound freedom was sweet, but now there was a new host of challenges that accompanied the freedom.

Listen, son of God, God sent his Son so that you might be redeemed, but he redeemed you so that you might be adopted into his family as a son!! You have a place to belong! He is going to take care of you! He will guide you! He will provide for you. And he will bring you home. You belong to the creator of the universe now and not as his slave but as his son! Think of the magnificent love of the father of the prodigal son. Here was that father waiting and watching for the return of his lavish son who had spent all his money, wasting it in the worst of ways. But here he comes dragging his way home and about to starve to death. The father sees him and does a most undignified thing, he girds his loins and begins to run. The two meet in a great hug. And the son begins his prepared speech. "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." "Nonsense!" says the Father, "bring a robe and bring a ring and kill the fattened calf, for this MY SON is alive again!"

God is an incredible father—the most incredible ever! There is no greater privilege than to be his adopted son. But that is what you are if you are in Christ through faith. Every Christian should be encouraged and strengthened by knowing that this is your Father in heaven. In us should be cultivated the desire to be a group of adopted sons who show forth the heart of our Father. It will welcome the repentant sinner. It will long for the unity of the people of God. It will rest in peace knowing who our Father is. And it will rejoice to be more and more like that Father every day.

And now finally, I want you to see ...

III. The Gift of Sonship.

It is an inexpressible blessing to be picked up off the street and brought into the household and family of God—to be adopted into God’s family as his son. But there is more! God has a special gift for those who become his adopted sons.

Thinking of Christmas this past week, there has been much gift-giving. It is a blessing to be able to give gifts to others to show them you love and appreciate them. And yet, speaking as a parent and grandparent, the gifts we gave to our children and grandchildren were the ones where we spent the most and gave the most thought. And we were watching intently as they opened those gifts. Likewise, God has given his best gifts to his sons. To begin with, he gave his only son. He sent him forth that we might be redeemed and receive adoption. And now having adopted us, he has given us another incredible gift—the gift of his Holy Spirit. Paul states in verse 6, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, “Abba! Father!”

The gift of the Holy Spirit is highly significant. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit by which God himself is at work to testify to us and assure us that we are his children. Part of the Lord’s intent of this gift is our cry unto God that he is father. As law-breakers we experience the inward cry of our shame and guilt, and we look to God as judge. But having been redeemed and set free from the law through the work of Jesus Christ, we now no longer see God as judge. The Holy Spirit according to Romans 8:15-16 causes us to cry “Abba! Father!” He bears witness to our spirit that we are the children of God. So the sending of the Spirit confirms that we are sons of God. And the result of the Spirit’s testimony within our heart is that we ourselves turn to God and acclaim him as father. He is no longer our judge. We are his sons and we are assured of his adoption of us into his family.

Now there is a further point of significance here. You don’t simply call him Father. You call him “Abba! Father!” These designations communicate intimacy and access. It is saying Father but with the closeness and assurance by which a child says, “Dad” or “Daddy.” As Melissa and I contemplated being grandparents, we were asked what we wanted to be called. And we both put a good deal of thought into it. Melissa chose Honey Gram. In my opinion it fits her sweetness and joyfulness perfectly. I wanted to be called by a name that wasn’t formal but reflected intimacy. I also wanted one that the kids wouldn’t mind using when they grow older. So I chose Grandad. It’s kind of funny what the grandkids actually call us at this point. Bekah calls Melissa “Honey Bam.” What Titus and Rebekah call me sounds more like “da-da.” But we love it because we feel we are close to their hearts. It is amazing that God himself has this very same objective in sending his Spirit into our hearts. He obviously loves to be called with an intimate name to reflect that he has granted us his ear and his heart and his love. By the Spirit we cry Abba! Father!

We must never overlook the holiness and majesty of God. But here is part of what makes our sonship so mind-boggling. The one true God, creator of heaven and earth, infinite, eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent nevertheless wants his children to treasure intimacy with him. He wants us to cherish that we have immediate access to him. He wants us to indulge in our first-name and informal basis with him. We can come to him as we are, call out to him at any time, with any need and any expression of our state of mind and heart.

And we should cry out to him with the confident assurance that he ALWAYS has our best interest in mind. He did not spare his own Son but sent him forth born of woman born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons. If God would

deliver up his Son for us in this way, how will he not also with him graciously give us everything we need, everything that is good and that will feed our eternal joy? He will not!

Brothers and sisters, how shall we respond to these truths? Number one, empowered by the grace of God in our union with Christ, we should relentlessly cry out, "Abba! Father!" We should pray without ceasing. Prayer should be a constant. In it we should be pouring out our hearts to God our Abba in communion and fellowship. Let us go deep with the One who wants us to know both his majesty and holiness and at the same time his delight in being close to his children.

And not only should we overflow regularly in prayer, we should respond to these truths with an assured faith. We can trust God no matter what. We are going to encounter tests to our faith, but we have to go back again and again to the demonstration of the unconditional and deeply caring love of God. I think of the Israelites as they made their way out of Egypt onward toward the land of promise. Whenever they encountered various threats—lack of water, lack of food, the threats of the enemy—they would complain. Perhaps their most staggering response was "let's just go back to Egypt." Whenever I encounter that response, I want to say them, "Are you kidding me? Go back to Egypt?" You really think that was better? Back to slavery? Back to the other side of all these miraculous works of rescue that the Lord has provided you? You have seen his hand again and again, and now when you face another challenge, you fold and wilt as though it's all too big for God, as though God doesn't care what happens to you out here? Come on!

And yet you and I, many times don't we tend to respond to challenging situations just like those Israelites? We must be reminded this morning of the love of Abba and the purpose of Abba and the gifts of Abba. Oh, I trust your confidence in his leading and providing and protecting and directing your life will be raised up a notch or two this morning. He sent forth his Son for your redemption and he sent forth his Spirit for your adoption. There is nothing he won't do that is good for you. Rest in him. Trust in him. Pray always to him and do not lose heart.

Conclusion

I want to close this message by addressing the question, "How does this text contribute to the overall point Paul is making in this letter?" Remember, that overall point is that these Galatians must not dare resort to going back to works of the law to be justified with God. No one has been able to be right with God on the basis of their work and they should not resort to such a mindset now. What no ordinary human being could do God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of human flesh. To seek justification and salvation by adding obedience to the law as a component of what it takes to be justified is like Israel wanting to turn back to slavery in Egypt. They would relinquish their freedom for being back under the tyranny of Pharaoh? No. That's obviously a grave mistake. So Paul is saying for anyone to go back to the law is the same exact thing. It is returning to enslavement when God has made you a son and an heir.

He is not saying that believers should not pursue righteousness. He is saying that believers should pursue righteousness as a fruit of their union with Christ not as a means of being right with God. God has already taken care of that.