

Sons Of God

Introduction. A family, executing their carefully planned escape, dashing for the border ... a man standing outside prison walls, gulping fresh air, awash in the hot sun ... a young woman with every trace of the ravaging drug gone from her system ... they are free! Whether fleeing oppression, stepping out of prison, or breaking a strangling habit, freedom means life. The past is forgotten and new options await.

In his profound Galatian letter, Paul proclaims the reality of our liberty in Christ — freedom from the Law and the power of sin. Continuing his basic argument from chapter 3 that salvation is by grace through faith, Paul further develops in 4:1-11 the analogy of a child becoming an adult (cp. 3:23-26). The figures of child and servant represent life under the Mosaic Law and the figures of adult and son represent life in Christ.

The analogy continues to contrast man before salvation, when, whether Jew or Gentile, he is under God's Law, and man after salvation, when he is in Christ. The central truths of this passage are that life under Law is meant by God to be preparation for divine sonship, and that obedience to His grace brings realization of that sonship.

I. Preparation For Sonship

- A. In vv. 1-3, Paul lays out the basis of our sonship. Under ancient law, sons were heirs, destined to inherit what belonged to their fathers; in contrast, slaves were part of the inherited property. Furthermore, minor children were subordinated just as slaves; only after leaving the home did a child achieve freedom in practice.
- B. Although ancient customs varied, there was usually a prescribed age when a child would officially take on the privileges and responsibilities of adulthood. Every culture had a ceremony signaling this transition.
 1. Until the age of 12, a Jewish boy was under his father's complete control. But at the bar mitzvah he would become his own man.
 2. In ancient Greece, a boy was considered a cadet when he reached the age of 18. At 20 his hair was cut and offered to Apollo, marking his coming of age.
 3. At the Roman ceremony boys would offer their toys and girls would offer their dolls in sacrifice as a symbol of putting childhood behind them.
 4. Therefore, the illustration of the child was easily grasped and understood to both Jews and Gentiles.
- C. While a child, he was under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. Along with his tutor (3:24-25), the family slaves would have charge of the children's education, training, and welfare.

D. In a similar way, while man was under the Law, he was held in bondage. Unless someone spiritually “comes of age” through obedience to Christ, every unbeliever is a kind of slave and is imprisoned “under the elements of the world,” or in this context, the Mosaic Law (cp. Colossians 2:8; Hebrews 5:12; 2 Peter 3:10). But God had something far better in mind.

II. Realization Of Sonship

A. Its source (vv. 4-5).

1. Just as a human father in ancient times set the time of his son’s coming of age, so did God the Father set the time to send forth His Son to Earth as man’s redeemer. It was in the “fulness of the time” that Jesus Christ came, exactly as and when the Father had established. The fulness refers to the completion of the period of preparation in God’s timetable for Jesus. When Jesus was born, circumstances were right religiously, culturally, and politically for the coming of the Messiah.
2. “Born of a woman” is not intended to be an exclusive statement emphasizing the absence of a man, and thus does not so much refer to Jesus’ virgin birth. It more refers to the fact that He was fully man, born like all other men, yet He was fully God too (Philippians 2:6-11).
3. Christ’s work was redemption (Matthew 20:28; Romans 8:3-4). Through this, we receive adoption. In the Roman world adoption was an honored custom that gave special dignity and family membership to those who were not born into a family.

B. Its confirmation (v. 6).

1. A human father cannot give his own nature to an adopted child, but God can and does by revealing His mind through the Holy Spirit to the inspired writers of the New Testament (1 Corinthians 2:9-13). Because of this, we now have all spiritual blessings in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).
2. Roman adoptions required a witness of the transaction: the Holy Spirit performs this function in Paul’s argument. That the Spirit should testify is natural because Judaism knew the Spirit as the one who inspired the Old Testament prophets.
3. The Spirit speaks to Christians through the Bible to remind them of their calling as God’s children (Romans 8:14). “Abba” is the Aramaic word for “papa,” a term of endearment rarely if ever used in Judaism to address God directly. It indicates the intimate relationship we have with our heavenly Father. It is a beautiful and magnificent proof of sonship.

C. Its consummation (v. 7).

1. It is a great privilege to be, through Christ, adopted children of the God of Heaven. We who by nature are children of wrath and disobedience (Ephesians 2:1-3) have become by grace children of His love (1 John 4:9-11).
2. The ultimate outcome of our relationship is inheritance of the Father's estate (Revelation 21:1-3). Because we are now in the Son, we are sons. If we are sons, then we are heirs through God (Romans 8:17).

D. Its obligation (vv. 8-11).

1. Judaism had its own special calendar of holy days, new moons, sabbatical years, etc. From a technical standpoint, this argument is a rhetorical exaggeration: Judaism and paganism felt that they had little in common. From the standpoint of experience, however, they would reject the Spirit (3:2; 4:6) for tradition and custom.
2. The prophets hoped that their devotion was not "in vain" (Psalm 73:13; cp. Isaiah 49:4; 65:23). Even God's judgments were "in vain" when Israel did not return to Him (Jeremiah 2:30). The image was always that of great labor expended with no return, due to the recipients' rebellion (Philippians 2:16; cp. 1 Thessalonians 3:5) or the ineffectiveness of a message (1 Corinthians 15:2, 14, 17, 58).
3. You have such an incredible privilege as a son of God, why would you want to go back into the world? Why would you want to go back to the immortality (promiscuity, lasciviousness), bad language, lying and cheating, slander and gossip, ungodly attitudes (covetousness, jealousy, hatred) of the past? Resist the pull of conformity to the world (Romans 12:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22; 1 John 2:15-17).

Conclusion. They were not fully gone, but they were in the process of leaving Christ (Galatians 1:6-9). They were enamored by the Judaizing teachers, and their infatuation blinded them to the deadly danger they faced. Infatuation often dulls the hearer to the somber warning of those who know where their direction will lead.