

Galatians Chapter 4
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In verses 1-7 of Chapter 4, Paul uses the metaphor of a minor child becoming the heir of parental property in order to help explain the purpose of the law. As you might recall, in the previous chapter Paul had been arguing the priority of faith as that which justifies us before God. He did this by means of the story of Abraham (Genesis 15) who was declared "righteous" before God because he believed God's promises. Paul then poses the obvious question: If the covenant of faith made through Abraham is the primary covenant for Christians, why did God make a covenant through Moses, the terms of which were based on the law?

This argument cannot be understood without referencing Paul's interpretation of the promise Abraham was called to believe in. The third part of this threefold promise, according to Paul, is that all the people of the earth would be blessed through the "offspring" of Abraham. As far as Paul is concerned, this is a reference to Jesus Christ, the offspring who came from the descendants of Abraham. Therefore, the argument goes, all people will be blessed through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul specifically describes what this blessing means in verses 4-7. However, first it might be helpful to restate the purpose of law as seen in the light of this interpretation.

In Chapter 3, Paul called the law our "disciplinarian." That is, just as the minor heir needs "guardians and "trustees," we need the law until we come of age—"the fullness of time."

Just as children need guardians to restrain possible harmful behavior until such time as they are old enough to know better, sinners need the law to restrain behavior that they are otherwise prone to engage in. All you have to do is look at the Ten Commandments to understand what Paul is talking about. Most of them are in the form of "you shall nots." These are laws meant to restrain harmful behavior such as murder, stealing, lying, and so forth. Such restraints are needed only for those who are prone to do such things. Therefore, the law was given for the same reason that a judge issues a restraining order to an abusive spouse: to stop the behavior in question. The law does not make a person righteous before God. Rather, the law restrains the unrighteous from engaging in unrighteous behavior. It functions in the same way that a disciplinarian functions for a child.

But a disciplinarian is needed only until the time when the child can take responsibility and choose not to act in harmful ways. So the most important point to be made here is how faith in the "offspring" of Abraham, namely, Jesus Christ, can free us from the need for a disciplinarian, namely the law. This Paul describes, as already mentioned, in verses 4-7.

The first point made here is that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, who was born of a woman and therefore human, making him subject to the law. However, by sending his divine Son into the world as a human like us, God was “adopting” us as God’s children, just as Jesus is God’s Son. That is, God is choosing to enter into a parental relationship with us by sending his Son into the world as a human being. Just as Jesus Christ becomes human, we become Jesus’ siblings—fellow heirs with him as God’s chosen children.

But how does this transaction work? How is it that because the Son of God becomes human, we become fellow children of God? There are two points to be made here, one having to do with God’s decision and the other with the effect of this decision on us. The first point is simple. When God chooses to send his Son into the world as a human being, God is choosing to become the Father of all human beings. Since God’s Son becomes human, all humans become God’s children. This is how God adopts us—by choosing to become one of us. In Christ, God becomes the Father of the human race.

The second point has to do with the effect God’s choice has on us. “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” This is how God’s choice to become human results in our transformation in children of God. In other words, when God’s Son becomes human, the Spirit of God’s Son is sent into our hearts. When God’s Son takes on our flesh, we take on the Spirit of God’s Son. In exchange for taking on our flesh, God gives us the Spirit of his Son. “The Blessed Exchange” (Luther) It needs to be understood that all of that is the work of God. It is God’s choice that Jesus takes on our flesh by being born a human. And therefore it is also God’s choice that the Spirit of his Son is given to us. It is all one act of God’s grace and love for us which is prior to everything. The word “adoption” encompasses both the fact that Jesus becomes human and the concurring fact that we therefore receive the Spirit of Jesus into our hearts.

What does this have to do with the law? Now that the offspring promised to Abraham, through whom all people would be blessed has arrived, we can receive him through faith and thereby become full heirs, receiving what was promised. This results not only in a formal change of status but also in a transformation of our nature. Having received the Spirit of Christ into our hearts, the very Spirit of God’s love whereby that divine decision was made in the first place, we—having been loved by God—are freed to love in return. Those who love no longer need a disciplinarian to make sure they didn’t do harm—as the commandments say. They not only avoid the wrong, they are now motivated to do what’s right in the sight of God. This is what it means to become a child of God. We reflect the presence of our Father in what we say and do.

Christian freedom then is not freedom from the law in order to sin. It is freedom from the law to act in love. The gift of Jesus’ Spirit (which is the same thing as the Holy Spirit) implants the love of God in our hearts so that the law is no longer needed.