

“Abba! Father!”

(Galatians 4:1-7)

Introduction

- It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to overstate the intimate relationship that Jesus Christ (the incarnate Son of God) had with God the Father while He was on earth. While Jesus came to earth willingly, and “*for the joy that was set before him endured the cross*” (Heb.12:2), He longed to return to His Father – as He is now seated at the Father’s right hand (Heb.12:2; Rom.8:34; Eph.1:20; 1Pet.3:22).
- Throughout the Gospels, we read many references about Jesus leaving earth and returning to His Father in heaven. In fact, just a quick perusal through John’s Gospel reveals several such verses in Scripture:

John 7:33 ~ “Jesus then said, ‘I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me.’”

John 13:1-4 ~ “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him, ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.”

John 16:28 ~ “I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.”

John 17:11 ~ “And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”

John 17:13 ~ “But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves.”

John 17:24 ~ “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

- Perhaps one of the more subtle, yet intimate, expressions of Jesus’ relationship with God the Father is found only in Mark’s Gospel – as Jesus was preparing to be arrested, tried, and eventually crucified:

Mark 14:32-36 ~ “And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’ ³³And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. ³⁴And he said to them, ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.’ ³⁵And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

- It is easy to miss, or misunderstand, Jesus calling God “*Abba, Father.*” The Greek word (*abba*), of Aramaic origin, translated “Abba” is unique word in Scripture, and in ancient Judaism. As we will see, it is used only three times in all of the New Testament and Jesus used it to describe the most intimate, the most affectionate, the most loving, of all relationships – the relationship between He and God. Similar to our English word “daddy” or “papa”, this word expresses the unique and deep intimacy between a loving father and child.

For Jesus to call upon God as His “*Abba, Father*” reveals the depth and closeness of their relationship. As Father and Son, within the Godhead, their love for one another is infinite and pure, their trust in one another is absolute and resolute, their bond is eternal and unbreakable. All this, and more, Jesus proclaimed when prayed, “Abba, Father.”

✓ Illust: “*abba* is an Aramaic word that means “father”; it is a term of endearment used within the family circle (not unlike our word “dad”); its degree of familiarity toward God was unknown in Judaism” (Mounce, W.D. *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*; “Abba”).

- Jesus’ longed to return to His Father’s side in heaven. While He walked on this earth, and specifically as He died upon the cross, Jesus’ relationship with the Father was veiled compared to what it was in His pre-incarnate state (in eternity past), and to what it is as He is now glorified forevermore. The relationship that Jesus has with God is one of Sonship, and God is His “Abba, Father.”
- This is important for us to understand because it has great implications for us as believers, and for our understanding of our relationship with God as His children. As we turn to the fourth chapter in the book of Galatians (Paul’s letter to the “*churches of Galatia*”; 1:2), we find the apostle Paul continuing his declaration and defense of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ – salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. In Galatians 4:1-7, Paul restates his argument for the Gospel in three parts: 1) the illustration, 2) the interpretation, 3) the implication.

1. The Illustration (vs.1-2)

- As he continued to declare and defend the true Gospel – salvation by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – the apostle Paul used the analogy of a typical Jewish family. “*I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ²but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father*” (vs.1-2). This illustration would have been readily and easily understood by the Galatian Christians to whom Paul was writing (1:2), and especially applicable to the Judaizers who were peddling their false (self-righteous) Gospel of legalism.
- In this illustration, Paul used seven descriptive words (six nouns, one adjective) to explain how the law of God served as a temporary place-holder until the coming of Christ (3:24), the fullness of the revelation of salvation by faith (3:23, 25).

“*heir*” (vs.1; n., *klēronomos*) ~ As we saw last week, an “*heir*” receives his/her inheritance as a birthright; not as something to be earned or repaid (see Gal.3:29; 4:7).

“*child*” (vs.1; adj., *nēpios*) ~ The Greek word Paul used, translated here as “*child*”, specifically referred to young child and even an infant (literally translated “not speaking; see Gal.4:3; 1Cor.3:1).

“*slave*” (vs.1; n., *doulos*) ~ The Greek word translated “*slave*” can also be translated “bondservant.” Much of the economy of the ancient world was driven by slavery [note: most often denoting people who became slaves as prisoners of war, not as primarily a result of discrimination or racism as in 19th century American slavery]. To be sure, this can be a difficult word for us to embrace, but we must remember that Paul (as did Jesus and the other apostles) used this word metaphorically to describe a Christian’s supreme devotion to Christ, or a sinner’s enslavement to sin (*doulos* is used 126x in the NT). In this passage, the central idea is that while the child is still young/immature, he/she cannot fully experience the rights of a child – in that sense, practically speaking, he “*no different from a slave*” (vs.1) – even though he is “*the heir*” (vs.1).

“*owner*” (vs.1; n., *kyrios*) ~ This word is used over 700 times in the New Testament, and can be translated “sir, master, owner or Lord.” It is most often used to refer to Jesus Christ as “Lord” (which is used five of the six occurrences in Galatians, e.g. Gal.1:3, 19; 5:10; 6:14, 18). Again, as the heir the child will actually (one day) own everything, but needs to be supervised while he/she is still a child.

“*guardians*” (vs.2; n., *epitropos*) ~ Therefore, until the child is old enough to care for him-/herself, they must be “*under*” the care of “*guardians and managers*” (vs.2). The Greek word translated “*guardians*” in verse two is similar to the word translated “guardian” (*paidagōgos*) in Galatians 3:24, 25, but the meaning is here is essentially the same. A “guardian” is one who would be responsible for the care, protection and training of a young child.

“managers” (vs.2; n., *oikonomos*) ~ Similarly, “*managers*” were household stewards. They were in charge of the household, entrusted with the responsibility of running (managing, being a good steward) of the household.

“father” (vs.2; n., *patēr*) ~ This is the most common word for “*father*” in the New Testament (used over 400 times). Obviously, in the illustration, he is the father of child, but also the one who has the ultimate authority over and responsibility for the child. The “father” is the one who determines the appointed time when the child no longer is subservient to household guardians or managers.

- The illustration is pretty simple to understand: a young child, practically speaking, needs to be under the supervision (guidance and care) of another until he is old/mature enough to be responsible for him-/herself. Practically speaking, the child’s position in the family was “*no different from a slave*” (vs.1). Realistically, however he/she was an heir of the family’s fortune – eventually the “*owner of everything*” (vs.1).

Gal 4:1-2 ~ “I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ²but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.”

- The point being (as we have seen, and we will see) the law of God is a “guardian” (or “manager), serving as a restraint and protection from sin. Ultimately, through guidance and discipline, the law worked to lead us to a salvation in Christ by faith. The law guides us until such a time when, having put our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, are saved. It is when we are saved, being justified by faith, that we no longer need the guardianship of the law.

Gal 3:23-26 ~ “Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.”

2. The Interpretation (vs.3-5)

- In the next verses (vs.3-5) – beginning with the phrase, “*In the same way we also*” (vs.3) – Paul went on to explain what he had previously illustrated. Each part of his illustration finds a theological parallel. The reference here to being “*children*” (vs.3; *nēpios*) is denoting the time before we were saved, when we “*were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world*” (vs.3). That is, when we were still under the power and curse, the tyranny and mastery, of sin (cf. Col.2:8, 20; 2Pet.3:10, 12).

Gal 4:8-9 ~ “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. ⁹But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?”

- Thankfully, God sovereignly intervened – making a way for us to be saved when there was no way. Paul wrote: “*But when the fullness of time had come*” (vs.4). The word “*fullness*” (*plērōma*; vs.4) carries with the idea of being filled to the point of overflowing, to the brim. In this context, it refers to the “*time*” (*chronos*) in human history when God had sovereignly determined that His Son would be born in the flesh. In other words, Jesus was born at the exact moment – in the precise place and in the precise way – that God had ordained from before the foundation of the world.
- Purely by His sovereign love and unmerited favor, “*God sent forth his Son*” (vs.4; cf. Jn.3:16; Rom.5:8). The God who justly condemns the sinner, is the same God who graciously justifies the sinner. God gave His own Son to save us from His wrath! God was not against (or duped by) Jesus coming to earth – it was God’s plan, God’s pleasure and God’s promise.

➤ Being *“born of woman”* refers to the fact that Jesus was fully man (human). In fact, Jesus was both fully man and fully God (Jn.1:1,14; 10:30). If He were not fully man, He could not have been tempted in every way which we were (Heb.2:14; 4:15) and He could not have represented man in His death on the cross. If He were not fully God, He would not have been the once-for-all atoning sacrifice for sins (Rom.6:10; Heb.10:10).

Heb 2:14-18 ~ “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

➤ Not only was Christ born fully man and fully God (Col.1:19; 2:9), He also was *“born under the law”* (vs.4). But what law was He under? The same law that every person is under before they receive Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Namely, God’s law written in the Old Testament. Just like everyone, Christ was born under the scrutiny and burden of God’s holy law. But unlike everyone, Jesus lived in perfect fulfillment of that law. The same law that declared us as unrighteous declared Him and righteous.

Heb 4:14-16 ~ “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

➤ The Greek word translated *“redeemed”* (vs.5; cf. 3:13; *exagorazō*) carries the imagery of buying a slave’s (or debtor’s) freedom. In this context, Christ *“redeemed”* the sinner who was enslaved to sin (Rom.6:17, 20) – *“under the law”* (vs.4, 5) – breaking and violating God’s law, and thereby justly cursed (condemned) by God. God’s penalty for sin is physical and eternal death (Rom.6:23). Everyone is a sinner (Rom.3:23), and justly sentenced by God with the “death penalty” of eternal condemnation.

Gal 3:13-14 ~ “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’ – ¹⁴so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

➤ One reason Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law, through His sinless life and substitutionary death, was *“so that we might receive adoption as sons”* (vs.5). Through the awesome miracle of salvation, God formally adopts believers and establishes them as His children. Paul’s concept of “adoption” here is the same for us today – the legal act of giving a child, who is not naturally a part of the family (often destitute, orphaned, or enslaved), the full rights and status as a member of the family. To be adopted by God is to inherit all the blessings and rights of being a child of God.

Eph 1:3-10 ~ “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Eph 2:3-5 ~ “among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved”

Eph 2:8-10 ~ “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Rom 8:14 ~ “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

Rom 8:23 ~ “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

➤ God did not adopt us into His family because we were so lovable, moral, ethical, religious, or spiritual. He did not adopt us because He was lonely, or because He needed anything (Acts 17:24-25). God’s sovereign determination to adopt (justify) sinners is based solely on His grace and love, not on any attribute or virtue of the sinner.

Titus 3:3-7 ~ “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

3. The Implication (vs.6-7)

- The implication of this is impossible to fully understand or exhaustively communicate. By God’s saving grace and sovereign love, God has adopted all believers to be His “*sons*” [and daughters; i.e. children] (vs.6). Through the
- As part of our salvation, in addition to our salvation, “*God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts*” (vs.6). The indwelling Spirit of God is God’s deposit in us guaranteeing our salvation (see **Gal.3:14**; cf. Eph.1:13-14; 4:30; Rom.8:15-17, 23; 2Cor.5:5). Among other things, the Spirit work within us to sanctify and persevere us in Christ (see Tit.3:5; 1Pet.1:2; 1Cor.6:11). As far as our status is concerned, we are no longer “*strangers and aliens*” to the people of God but “*members of the household of God*” (Eph.2:19).

The indwelling Spirit enables us to cry out to God. The Greek word translated “*crying*” (vs.6; *krazō*) is a strong word describing the caw or shriek of a raven – to God. The word is used here to describe the Spirit’s work interceding “*for us with groanings too deep for words*” (Rom.8:26; see Rom.8:26-27).

✓ **Illust:** “The fact that the Spirit of Christ in our hearts cries unto God and makes intercession for us with groanings should reassure us greatly. However, there are many factors that prevent such full reassurance on our part. We are born in sin. To doubt the good will of God is an inborn suspicion of God with all of us. Besides, the devil, our adversary, goeth about seeking to devour us by roaring: ‘God is angry at you and is going to destroy you forever.’ In all these difficulties we have only one support, the Gospel of Christ. To hold on to it, that is the trick. Christ cannot be perceived with the senses. We cannot see Him. The heart does not feel His helpful presence. Especially in times of trials a Christian feels the power of sin, the infirmity of his flesh, the goading darts of the devil, the agues [acute fever] of death, the scowl and judgment of God. All these things cry out against us. The Law scolds us, sin screams at us, death thunders at us, the devil roars at us. In the midst of the clamor

the Spirit of Christ cries in our hearts: ‘Abba, Father.’ And this little cry of the Spirit transcends the hullabaloo of the Law, sin, death, and the devil, and finds a hearing with God.

The Spirit cries in us because of our weakness. Because of our infirmity the Holy Ghost is sent forth into our hearts to pray for us according to the will of God and to assure us of the grace of God”

(Martin Luther; *Luther’s Commentary on Galatians*; 4:6).

- With full, legal, status as God’s adopted children, believers can honestly, earnestly, call upon God (the one true holy, creator, sovereign God) “*Abba! Father!*” (vs.6). This intimate and personal expression toward God was unthinkable, unimaginable, for the Jew (and should not be taken lightly). In fact, even referring to God as Father was a radical notion for Jewish people. Much to the angst of the Jewish leaders, Jesus often referred to God as His Father and even encouraged all His disciples to call God their Father (see Matt.6:9).

Through the indwelling presence of God, all believers are able to cry out to God as their “*Abba! Father!*” (vs.6). God is not only their Creator and Savior, He is now also their Father and their Daddy. This is not to over-sentimentalize or trivialize the relationship between God and the believer. Rather, it illustrates the unique closeness that believers have with God through their faith in Christ, and the indwelling work of the Spirit of God.

✓ **Illust:** “‘Abba’ is a diminutive of the Aramaic word for father and could be translated ‘daddy’ or ‘papa.’ It was a warm, intimate term of endearment used by young children of their fathers. The Holy Spirit brings us into personal, intimate relation with our heavenly Father, whom we can approach at any time and under any circumstance, knowing that He lovingly hears us and cares for us”

(John MacArthur; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*: Galatians; 3:26).

✓ **Illust:** “All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have His name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation” (“Westminster Confession of Faith”; chap. XII, of adoption).

- The point being, Christians are no longer “*slaves of sin*” (Rom.6:17, 20), “*slaves to impurity*” (Rom.6:19), or “*enslaved to elementary principles of this world*” (Gal.4:3), no longer “*children of the devil*” (1Jn.3:10) or “*children of wrath*” (Eph.2:3), but children of God – “*you are no longer a slave, but a son*” (vs.7).

Rom 8:12-17 ~ “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ ¹⁶The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

- What a glorious, magnificent, awe-inspiring, and humbling doctrine. We who were enemies of God are made the children of God, only because the Son of God was set apart to be regarded as the enemy of God. Jesus was made a curse for us, so that the blessing of salvation would come on all who would ever believe – the blessing in which God says to the believe, “You are Mine. You are my child.”

Gal 3:25-29 ~ “But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

John 1:11-13 ~ “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Conclusion

➤ I have heard it said that “a dysfunctional family is any family with at least one member in it.” To be sure, all of us are at least a little dysfunctional. This is evident in our biological families, and even in our church family. This is not true, however, when God glorifies His “forever family.” When God justifies, sanctifies and glorifies a sinner – saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone – that adoption is both “legal” and permanent (Jn.10:28-29; Jd.1:24-25)!

1 John 3:1 ~ “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. ...”

1 John 3:1 ~ “See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. ...” (NASB)

1 John 3:1 ~ “Look at how great a love the Father has given us, that we should be called God's children. And we are! ...” (HCSB)

➤ It is no difficult, nor great feat, to point our flaws in a Christian’s life, or dysfunction in a local church. No Christian lives a perfect, sinless, life. Scriptures reminds us that “*we all stumble in many ways*” (Jms.3:2). One thing you can know for sure, if you are a true believer in Christ Jesus – if you have truly received Jesus as your Lord and Savior – you are a child of God, a part of God’s family forevermore! Christians are children of God. By God’s saving grace and sovereign love, they have been formally and permanently adopted by God – adoption papers signed in blood, the shed blood of Jesus Christ. As God’s children – saved and sanctified by the work of Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit – believers can rightly, amazingly, call upon (the one, true, holy and Sovereign) God as their Father.

Moreover, believers can call upon God as “Abba, Father”, reflecting the most intimate, most affectionate, most caring of all relationships. If you are a true believer in Christ – receiving Jesus as your Lord and Savior – than you are forever a child of God, and an heir to all that comes with being a child of God. By God’s saving grace and sovereign love, through the sinless life and substitutionary death of Christ, those who put their faith in Jesus Christ share in the inheritance that God has for His Son. “How great a love that the Father has given to us, that we should be called ‘Children of God’!”