

Galatians 4:1–31

From Bondage to Sonship: Living as Children of the Promise

Introduction: Heirs Who Do Not Yet Live Like Heirs

In Galatians 4, Paul continues addressing the tragic irony unfolding in the Galatian churches. Believers who had been set free by grace were voluntarily placing themselves back into bondage. Those who had become heirs of God through faith were beginning to live as though they were still servants.

Paul's concern is not merely theological accuracy. It is relational. At stake is how believers understand their relationship with God—whether they approach Him as loved sons or fearful servants.

1. An Heir Who Lives Like a Servant

Galatians 4:1–2

“Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a servant, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father.”

Paul uses an illustration familiar in the ancient world. A child born into a wealthy household is the rightful heir of everything, yet while immature, he has no practical access to that inheritance. He lives under supervision, instruction, and restriction until the father determines that he is ready.

The point is not status, but maturity. Ownership exists, but enjoyment is delayed.

Paul applies this spiritually. Believers are heirs of God, yet while living under immaturity or misunderstanding, they may fail to enjoy what already belongs to them in Christ.

2. From Bondage to Adoption

Galatians 4:3–7

“Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world.”

Before Christ, humanity lived under systems that could instruct but not transform. These “elements” included law, ritual, and religious obligation—structures that restrain behavior but cannot produce righteousness.

Then history changed.

“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

Jesus entered human history at the precise moment God ordained. He lived under the law and fulfilled it perfectly so that those condemned by the law could be redeemed.

Jesus saved us when He shed His blood on the cross. The resurrection declares that He is God, Savior, and Lord. Redemption is complete, and something astonishing follows—adoption.

“And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father.’ Therefore you are no longer a servant but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.”

Believers do not merely receive forgiveness; they receive family. The Spirit creates intimacy, not fear. God is no longer approached as a distant judge, but as a loving Father.

3. The Danger of Returning to Bondage

Galatians 4:8–11

Paul now expresses deep concern.

“But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods.”

Before knowing the true God, people served idols through rituals and religious effort. Paul is alarmed that believers, having come to know God—and more importantly, having been known by God—are turning back.

“How is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?”

Religious systems that promise favor through observances, seasons, and rituals appear meaningful but are powerless to bring life.

“You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.”

Any system that replaces relationship with ritual subtly denies the sufficiency of Christ.

4. Truth Spoken in Love

Galatians 4:12–20

Paul’s tone softens.

“Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I became like you. You have not injured me at all.”

Paul reminds them of their early relationship. When he first preached to them, he did so in physical weakness.

“You received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.”

They once rejoiced deeply in grace.

“What then was the blessing you enjoyed?”

Legalism had drained their joy and replaced intimacy with obligation.

“Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?”

False teachers were zealous, but their zeal was manipulative.

“They zealously court you, but for no good.”

Paul’s response is prayerful anguish.

“My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you.”

Paul longs not for conformity, but for Christlikeness.

5. Law and Promise: Two Ways to Relate to God

Galatians 4:21–27

Paul now turns to Scripture.

“Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?”

Abraham had two sons—one born through human effort, the other through divine promise.

“He who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise.”

Paul explains that these represent two covenants.

“One from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage... but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.”

The law produces bondage because it demands what the flesh cannot deliver. Promise produces freedom because it depends on God’s faithfulness, not human ability.

6. Children of the Promise, Not of the Flesh

Galatians 4:28–31

“Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.”

Those who live by faith in Jesus Christ are heirs, not because of effort, but because of God’s promise.

“Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the bondwoman and her son.’”

Law and grace cannot coexist as equal systems. The law can expose sin, but it cannot bring inheritance.

“So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.”

Believers do not relate to God through law, works, or personal merit. They relate to Him through faith in Jesus Christ and the promises secured by His finished work.

Practical Application for Believers

- Stop relating to God as a servant trying to earn favor
- Embrace your identity as a son or daughter through adoption
- Resist systems that replace relationship with ritual
- Trust God's promises more than your performance
- Let the Spirit cultivate intimacy, not fear

A Challenge for Believers

Many believers still live with a reward-and-punishment mindset learned from the world. But that is not how we relate to God. Having begun in grace, refuse to return to bondage. Live as a child of promise, not a servant of fear.

An Invitation to Non-Believers

You cannot earn your way into God's family. No ritual, effort, or morality can make you righteous.

Jesus Christ shed His blood on the cross for your sins. He rose from the dead, proving that He is Lord. Through faith in Him, you can be forgiven, adopted, and made an heir of God.

Turn from sin. Trust in Jesus Christ. Receive the gift of eternal life today.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You for the freedom we have through faith in Jesus Christ. Thank You that our relationship with You rests on Your promises, not our performance. Teach us to live as children of the free woman—confident, loved, and secure in Your grace. Amen.