

# HEIRS OF GOD'S PROMISES

## *SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS*

By Steve Zeisler

There was a report in the news last week about a recruitment brochure published by the University of Wisconsin. In it they used a photo of some students at an athletic event. Because the photo hadn't suggested diversity, they had used Photoshop to add an African American to the picture. When they got caught falsifying diversity, they were humiliated.

The dominant cultural values of our time are inclusion, diversity, and openness. The Scriptures, of course, have a great deal to say on these subjects. In fact, you can build the best of all cases for the importance of diversity, breaking down barriers, openness, and inclusion, based on the witness of Scripture!

But there is a wrong basis for making that appeal, and the wrong basis is the one more commonly used. The problem with it is that it lacks any word from our Creator. To use a philosophical term, there is no metanarrative behind it, no big story, no large truth that encompasses everything. Everybody's experience, every point of view, has the same worth as every other. Everybody has a small but equal part; therefore, everybody should be included.

The argument of Scripture is the opposite: we are all great! We all were fashioned by God's fingers and intended to be his companions eternally. Therefore we are all included in the plan of God.

Galatians 3:28 is a wonderful New-Testament call to inclusiveness: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The barriers that divide us in terms of race, class, wealth, gender, and everything else are done away with. Why are these things unimportant? The argument goes back to 3:26-27: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Verse 29 continues, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

The metanarrative, the great truth for everyone in all places and all times, is that before the Creator made anything, he chose to have human heirs, grown sons (of both genders), mature saints who are like him, in his Son. He made humanity for greatness, maturity, freedom. He made us to have significance. So one of the greatest stories is the insistence that children should grow to maturity. Another is that slaves should be free. We'll see both of these metaphors in the text of Galatians 4.

Most cultures have rites of passage, subtle ways of marking socially, religiously, or culturally that you are no longer a child but a grownup. Jews, for instance, have bar mitzvahs for boys and bat mitzvahs for girls at about the age of puberty, which is when rites of passage usually take place. (One explanation of some of the difficulty of our contemporary culture is that we don't have many rites of passage.)

The reference in Galatians 3:27 that we just read, "You...have clothed yourselves with Christ," is almost certainly a reference to a Roman rite of passage. A young man would don a special toga signifying manhood at about the age of puberty. In the movie *The Gladiator*, one of the anxious moments is when it seems the hero may not make it back home to see his son go through the rite of donning his toga.

Using references to various cultures and the familiar idea of desiring our children to grow up, Paul is helping us to long for maturity in our own lives. At the end of chapter 4 is a series of allegories in which the picture gets bigger and bigger. There's a glorious change when we become heirs of the promise, saints before God, the great thing we

were made for. There are two women, two mountains, two sons, two covenants, heaven and earth chiming in together. It's as if Paul can't contain himself, it's so huge and magnificent! Everywhere you look you see the same thing: the heart of God to make us who he intended us to be: grownups who stand before him, honored as his sons.

Galatians 4:4 says, "The time had fully come...." That refers to Israel's growth. Even a nation can be a child, and presented with its Messiah, it has the opportunity to become mature.

Consider Galatians 4:1-11:

**What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.**

The last clause means, "That we might be adopted as sons."

**Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."**

The Aramaic word *Abba* means "Daddy" or "Papa." It conveys intimacy with God.

**So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.**

**Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.**

This seems to be a reference to Gentile believers who had come out of pagan idolatrous religion.

**But now that you know God--or rather are known by God--how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!**

The latter verse is probably about the Jewish calendar with its Sabbaths, holidays, and special times for reflection.

**I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.**

## **From childhood and slavery to Sonhood**

Paul mixes the two metaphors of childhood and slavery. Some commentators say that these two metaphors refer to two respective groups of people: Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were minor children and the Gentiles were slaves; God intervened and both became sons. It's very difficult to make that explanation work, however, if you follow the argument carefully. Paul keeps flipping back and forth between the two metaphors. At one point, for instance, he speaks of Jewish practice as enslaving. It's not just Gentiles worshiping idols who were enslaved. We should take what he says in verse 1 at face value: there is no real difference between being a slave and being a child. In each case you are not yet what you are intended to be. You have not had the experience of God's acting on your behalf to create a life of maturity and freedom. Slaves and minor children are each under restrictions; they are buffeted by narrowness, requirements, and rules.

Slaves and minor children require the intervention of God. Verses 4-5: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of

sons.” God sent his own Son from heaven into the human experience, to act for us in ways we could not act for ourselves. If you keep feeding and protecting babies, they will eventually become large people, but there’s no guarantee they will become mature. Maturity requires purposeful intervention. God legally adopted minor children and made them sons, so that they would become mature heirs. In the same way, in the ordinary course of events slaves don’t become free unless somebody intervenes. But God sent his Son into the world; he went into the slave market and bought slaves, redeemed them, so that they would become free sons.

Verse 6 says, “God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts...” There’s a remaking that happens repeatedly as God sends his Spirit. The Spirit reminds us that we are beloved of our Father. We may enter the throne room of God, climb onto his lap, and put our arms around him. We may call him, “*Abba*, Daddy.”

The work of God is to enable us to stand on our feet with courage and wisdom and purpose, worth everything to him, living significant lives, gifted for gospel purposes, worthy of singing his praise--great beings, a marvelous creation! So Paul asks in 4:9-11: “If you are an heir now, why would you go back to childhood and slavery? What would ever possess you to re-enslave yourself, to diminish yourself, to talk baby talk when you should be preaching the oracles of God? What would persuade you to limit yourself the way a child needs to be limited, when you were meant for maturity?”

## **Failure to be mature**

Psychologists have done studies about men and women raised by alcoholics. They found that adult children of alcoholics had common tensions and struggles. These folks were eventually referred to as “adult children,” and over time this phrase came to refer to individuals who never grow up. Full-grown people ought to be mature and free, but these are not. They continue to act and think like subordinates and minors, to refuse the possibilities of adulthood. They continue to try to meet the standards that have been set for them by someone else--perhaps someone who is no longer even living. They want the protection of others rather than the risks of freedom. They want to have their needs met by others when they might engage the world as a giver instead of a receiver. Very often, adult children whine instead of making choices. They are scared when they ought to be confident. They refuse freedom’s responsibility. All of us have some familiarity with preferring childhood to maturity. But Jesus came to break the power of that in our experience.

In the movie *The Godfather*, there is a scene in which Vito Corleone speaks to his youngest son Michael, explaining why Santino the oldest brother would have been a terrible don: he was too uncontrolled, too angry, too prone to making bad decisions. Fredo, the second brother, would also have been a terrible don: he never grew up. He remained a child who always gave way to pleasures and self-interest. But then there was Michael: “Michael, you would be a good don. You are a mature man. You can make hard decisions. You can endure consequences.” *The Godfather* is the story of a crime family, of course, gifted at evil and breaking the law. But the same principle is true in the church, for the cause of Christ, for the sake of the gospel: it takes grownups to engage the world in its complexity, to trust God for things, and to make a difference where they are. We are supposed to be dons in the cause of Christ.

I remember discussions I had with my children when they were younger about restrictions I was building in their lives.

“You need to be home by 11:00.”

“No, that’s terrible! My friends can stay out until 12:00! You’re a horrible dad!”

I’d set their allowance, and they’d say, “That’s too little, I deserve more! If you weren’t such an ogre....”

Or, “Here are the rules about homework....”

“I can do it myself! Why do you make the rules?”

The assumption in their minds was that somehow I liked the role of laying down the law. What they didn't know was that I was just as anxious to be done with rules as they were. I was thinking, “You know what, child of mine? I am anticipating the day when you are wise enough and strong enough that a curfew never once comes up, because you're grown up!”

But what an immense sorrow it would be for people who were grown and capable to go back and ask their aged parents for a curfew, to haggle with them over the spending of money! Paul is saying that we are heirs and nothing less. God has intervened in Christ. The Spirit has made his home in our hearts. We are the intimates of God. When we need wisdom he'll supply it. He'll make us courageous. We've been given gifts to serve him, possibilities we've never even encountered yet, a world to change. We're made for maturity, and we cannot settle for anything less.

## **Failure to be free**

In the case of slavery, the other metaphor used here, the same argument obtains. Worship of idols is enslaving. One example of idolatrous thinking is the notion that money will make us strong and worthy people. We can't stop believing it and acting as if it were true. Another example is the pursuit of pleasure--short-term laughter, based on nothing and leading to nothing, hollow at its core. It's a “weak and miserable” part of our beginnings. The pursuit of pleasure is a promise that eventually becomes a slavery. After Christ intervenes and sets us free to be saints in the presence of God, why would we ever go back to slavery?

Some of the financial institutions and reporters are setting up bureaus in Silicon Valley. They want to make famous some of the young, up-and-coming, Silicon Valley multimillionaires who are changing the world. The idea is that Silicon Valley ought to have its own names quoted in financial circles, along with New York, Washington, and Chicago. Wanting the perks that come with notoriety or fame can become a slavery. When God in Christ intervenes and the Spirit makes his home in our hearts, we're given real maturity instead of the deceptive charm and immaturity of fame. We are made into heirs, sons of God who have something really worth living for. Why would we go back to slavery? It doesn't make sense.

## **Maturing in loving community**

Let me comment briefly on 4:12-20:

**I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?**

**Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us, so that you may be zealous for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!**

Paul is moving on from the metaphors of childhood and slavery and speaking now of a shared experience, but he's still arguing for the same underlying point. The way you grow up or become mature is in community with other people who really love you, especially in times of weakness. Paul is remembering back when, during an illness--perhaps an eye disease--he spent time in Galatia. The Galatians ministered to him and he shared the gospel with them. There was honesty in the relationship and they grew together. What has happened to real Christian community and real freedom?

He asks a telling question: "Have I become your enemy by exposing the truth?" The person who tells you the truth because they love you is not your enemy. The person who tells you what you want to hear, in order to get something from you--that person is your enemy. So Paul contrasts himself with these others who are seeking out the Galatian Christians.

The passion of Galatians 4 is for God to gain mature sons. He is committed to making us into heirs of his promise to Abraham. We don't have to be "adult children" or slaves anymore. We were meant for wonderful things: courage, wisdom, and love. We were meant to change the world, to tell the truth, to wake up hopeful and go to bed thankful every day. We were meant to be greater than whatever set of circumstances we find ourselves in. Our circumstances don't define us--we are glorious creations, heirs of Abraham. Let's not let the familiarity of slavery and childhood reclaim us when they have no right to.

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