

## **Abba, Father**

Galatians 3:28 - 4:5

I have never counted them all up, but the number of Hebrew words that you all know is quite high. Words like Hallelujah. And Messiah. Jehovah. Adam. Torah. Satan. Sabbath. Immanuel. Those are all Hebrew words, and rather than trying to translate them into English, they come to us exactly as they are in the original language. Rather than trying to explain the meaning of those words in a different language, we just take them the way as they come. This afternoon we come to another example, the word Abba. It is an Aramaic word, rather than Hebrew, and the reference is always the same. It is the word the children of a family use for their father as distinct from the way in which the servants would address the master of the house.

The use of the word points out the very distinction which Paul has belabored to make clear for us as his readers. As believers, you have put on Christ, Paul says in the passage we studied last week, chapter 3 verse 27. To put on Christ means, of course, to become a Christian. To be united with Christ, to be justified by faith in Christ. It means to become a child of God. And all the rights that we enjoy as children of God can be summarized with this single Hebrew word, Abba. And those who have the right to call upon God with this name of Abba are also described as heirs, those who are given the privilege of an inheritance. And that's our focus this morning.

Remember the broad context, that Paul is urging these Galatians to separate themselves from the errors of the Judiazers, that group within the church who were trying to impose all the Jewish ceremonial regulations upon new Gentile converts. The Judiazers were trying to impose the regulations of the law as a necessary ground upon which the new converts would become

acceptable to God. And, the danger of their error was obvious. The effect would be that they would be nullifying the grace of God, they would denying and dismissing the whole declaration and revelation of the grace of God. Remember,

Gal. 2:21 "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."

If salvation is of works, then it is not of grace. It is, and must be, one or the other.

Rom. 11:6 "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace."

So that's the danger. And with Paul, I'll begin today with a contrast in order to make that danger clear. It is the contrast between those who are, indeed, saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and those who have not yet entered that relationship with God but are still trying to earn his favor by the merits of their own efforts. And for this contrast, Paul identifies these ones who are still trying to earn God's favor by their own works as children under age. Not children in the most blessed sense, as we'll in a few minutes. But children who, according to verse 1, do "not differ at all from a slave." Minor children, we might label them, under the direct and immediate authority and oversight of their parents, children without legal rights or freedom of their own. Children under age. They have guardians and managers, a schoolmaster or tutor, as we studied last week.

So what is that experience all about? How does Paul describe and define...

### **I. LIFE AS CHILDREN UNDER AGE.**

They are, first of all,

### **A. Enslaved.**

He says that they are no different than a slave. The child might be the legal heir. He might bear legal ownership of the whole estate, but the inheritance is in a trust, to use the legal language of our day. Therefore, since he has no access to the inheritance, in effect, he really is not different than the household servants.

v.1-2

In other words, enslaved. Look at,  
v.3

Please realize that in this verse, “while we were children” refers to children under age, minor children who are in the same position as slaves. The contrast will be the fullness of blessing offered to those who are later called “the children of God,” those who have been adopted as sons having received the spirit of adoption. But here, still, the underage children are enslaved, “to the elemental things of the world.”

That, too, is quite a fascinating expression. To continue the analogy, these elementary principles are compared to the nurture and admonition that a very young child receives from his parents. Young children really only have only obligation, to obey their parents. Everything else falls under that simple category. And discipline is simple and plain. Disobedience brings discipline, typically spanking. Disobedience receives the rod. Direct, unquestioned and immediate obedience to law was required. As one commentator puts it, “Compulsory obedience to definite rules of justice and order was necessary preparation.”

So the “elemental things of the world” are, I believe, most clearly understood as the simple, straightforward requirements of the whole the law of Moses, especially as related to worship.

They are the whole system of external observances to the law imposed upon the people of Israel in the Old Covenant. The ceremonial law, as we often identify it.

Literally the word has reference to the letters of the alphabet. The focus of the teaching given to a very young child just learning to read. You learn the elemental principles, the abc’s. It is where 3, 4 and 5 year old children begin. When you begin to learn math, the elemental principles are those basic math facts that all children must learn.  $2 + 2 = 4$ .  $2 + 3 = 5$ . And so on.

The people of Israel were enslaved to those elementary principles of the ceremonial law. For example, they had to have a priest to offer sacrifices for them. The blood of the animal sacrifices had to be shed. The whole work of the priesthood had to be accomplished, year after year. They had to attend the ceremonial feasts. There were dietary regulations. Clothing regulations. Necessary procedures for cleansing and purifications. They had to do them all. And that is what it means when Paul says that they were “under the law.”

More accurately,

### **B. Under law.**

And under the elemental things of the world, learning as a child would learn, the basic foundation of the alphabet and the multiplication tables. This is Paul’s point in all of this, that we no longer infants. We are no longer under this principle of law. We no longer under the duty and obligation of those elemental principles. In Christ. In Christ, we are freed from that slavery of law. We are, according to verse 5, redeemed from “under law.”

So the contrast is between the people of God in the Old Covenant, under law as a schoolmaster to lead them to Messiah,

Jesus, and the people of God in the New Covenant who are redeemed from that slavery to the external regulations of the law. For example, verse 10, “You observe days and months and seasons and years.”

The children under age were obligated to fulfill all of those regulations. They were enslaved. And what Paul is teaching the Galatians, and us, is that as Christians we grow up. We used to be children under age, he tells his predominantly Jewish readers. You used to be no different than a slave, but you grew up and you are thus,

## **II. BECOMING AN HEIR.**

What a glorious promise it is!

v.7

Now he means “son” in the fullest sense. No longer an infant son under the guardianship of a schoolmaster. But a son who has reached the maturity of age to receive his own inheritance. And to get back to the end of chapter 3,  
3:29

So you who have “put on Christ,” you are “Christ’s.” You belong to Christ. And that means, you are the true descendants of Abraham and you are the rightful heirs of the promise of God made to Abraham. The promise is that you shall be justified by faith, not by works.

So all other distinctions fall to the side. All those other distinctions grow out of the elementary principles of the world. So,  
v.28

The first in that list is the definitive statement. There is neither

Jew nor Gentile. So how can you Jewish Christians compel the Gentile Christians to observe your old elementary principles, such as circumcision. That whole distinction is rendered irrelevant.`

There is a definitive progression from the Old Covenant to the New, and that is simplicity. Let me read about that progression from the words of our Confession of Faith, and I emphasize as I do so that, as a Church, we believe this confession to be a standard, faithful exposition of Scripture. So I quote the Confession, but do so to say that this is, I believe, what the Bible teaches. The Confession puts the teaching of the Bible together such that we are able to understand the whole much more consistently.

So the Westminster Confession, chapter 7, paragraph 5, “This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament. [Paragraph 6] Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.”

The movement is from the elementary principles of the administration of the covenant before Jesus, to the simplicity of administration of the New Covenant after Jesus. The movement is from slavery to those elementary principles to the freedom of those who are united to Christ by faith. So our worship is much simpler. To be explicit, no animal sacrifices. Our duties and responsibilities are simpler. No ceremonial laws to bind our conscience, not for us as we live by faith in union with Jesus.

v.7

Now, how did that happen? Let me narrow in now and focus upon,

#### **A. The work of Jesus.**

How are we freed from this slavery? How are we able to be released from the bondage of living under law? Simple answer. Jesus.

v.4

Several things there. First, note the emphasis upon the sovereignty of God in the context of time. “When the fullness of time came.” That simply means, “the perfect time.” The time God determined to be perfect. The time God determined. Let me read the cross reference in,

Eph. 1:7 “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

And in case “the fullness of time” is still a bit uncertain in your mind, listen to Jesus’ own words in,

Mark 1:14 “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into

Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Then also,

1 Tim. 2:5 “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”

As the time of Jesus was determined by “the command of the eternal God.” It is God’s time, the proper time, the fullness of time. And what did God do? God the Father sent forth his Son. And just so you realize what took place, Paul tells us he was “born of woman.” In other words, the second person of the Trinity became a man, a human being with flesh and blood.

That’s how we become heirs to the promise of God. That’s how you become a Christian. That’s how you are freed from the slavery of the law. By faith in Jesus, the Son of God who became man. This point is so well made in John’s gospel.

John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men... 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The word became flesh. The son of God became flesh, he was born of a woman, but more than that, look again at verse 4. More than merely becoming a man, more than his incarnation, he was born “under the law.” Or, as I have been saying, “under law.” Under the principle of law, under the duties and obligations of the

law, including all of those “elementary principles of the world.” He came, as he said when he was baptized, “to fulfill all righteousness.”

So Jesus submitted himself to all of the regulations of the law. And he fulfilled them perfectly. Without fault and without sin. Thus we are exhorted as Christians,

Phil. 2:5 “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Jesus became a man in order to submit himself to the law, so that by perfectly fulfilling all of those duties and obligations, all of those elementary principles, he might free us from that slavery. That is really a summary statement for this whole book of Galatians.

So look at verse 5, “that He might redeem those who were under the Law.” Now the focus is on,

### **B. The work of redemption.**

Jesus came to make heirs out of slaves, and the process by which that takes place is redemption. That word means to rescue. To ransom. To buy back, to pay the price, the ransom price. So all that Jesus came to earth to accomplish is defined with these simple words, “that He might redeem those who were under the Law.”

Do you see why circumcision is such a big issue? Because if you go back under law, you deny and invalidate what Jesus came to do. That’s why Christian freedom is such a big issue today,

that we don’t burden Christians today with external, ceremonial regulations as if there standing with God depended upon those external observances. A denial of Christian freedom means the imposition of slavery, and the imposition of slavery means a rejection of the redeeming work of Jesus.

For an example, Paul writes,  
v.9-11

When I was growing up, I lived in a predominantly Roman Catholic area, and so obviously many of my friends were Catholic. I didn’t understand much about Catholicism in those days, but I understood one thing very clearly. If it were Christmas or Easter, they better go to mass! They could miss mass other weeks. They could skimp on their attendance and the fulfillment of their duties otherwise, but you couldn’t miss Christmas or Easter. They were enslaved to those elementary principles! They were enslaved to “days and months and seasons and years.”

As an Episcopalian, I grew up with the practice of “giving something up for Lent.” Lent is the 40 day period of preparation before Easter Sunday, and at it’s best, it is defined to be a time of preparation, of an intensified commitment to prayer and even fasting, to repentance and to self-denial. So Catholics won’t eat meat on Fridays during Lent, “abstaining” such that they will only eat fish. And so any Catholic Church that provides food regularly will offer a fish dinner on Friday.

This so-called “holy season” of Lent ends with what is still often called “holy week,” the week before Easter, as if the observance of those days automatically represents an increased commitment to faithfulness in the service of God; as if eating fish on Friday brings you closer to God.

To the contrary, I would call those duties and regulations slavery. They are precisely the sorts of things from which Jesus has freed us. “You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.” And so the probing question of verse 9, “how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?”

I believe that principle applies any time you add a human regulation or requirement as a principle of duty that goes beyond the simplicity of worship and obedience which God requires of his new covenant people today. Anytime you add and prescribe duties that go beyond the Scripture, you introduce slavery to “the elemental things of the world.”

That would include a dress code that goes beyond the biblical principles of modesty and decency. It could be an educational philosophy for your children. That would include prohibitions against things that God doesn’t forbid, such as alcohol. That would include the requirement for conformity to customs and activities that God doesn’t prescribe, customs that might be well established in your own tradition but not made a requirement by God.

Beloved, we as a church are not immune from those dangers. May we never forget, and never fail to emphasize, that,

v.4 “...when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law.”

But there is one final phrase in that verse, one final positive focus. I end with that focus this afternoon as an introduction to what will be a whole sermon upon the subject next time. We are redeemed from slavery, redeemed from being under law, in order

to receive a great blessing and privilege. We are redeemed from slavery and redeemed to something else. Namely, adoption. Sonship. We are redeemed in order to receive the blessings of adoption.

v.5b “...that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

Beloved, if you are in Christ, that is your standing. That is your privilege. That is your glory. That is your freedom. You have the adoption as sons. And daughters. You have the blessed privilege of being called children of God, so great is the love that he has lavished upon you. Children of God, who cry out, “Abba, Father.”

There are only three people on this earth who have that freedom with respect to me. Only three people whose relationship with me is defined by this Hebrew word Abba. Only three people, and they are therefore, to me, most precious. Only my own precious daughters know me as Abba.

As a Christian, that is to be your relationship with your Father in heaven. And it is to be as warm and as affectionate as that relationship I share with my precious daughters.

v.6-7

And all of that, of course, is possible, because,  
v.4-5