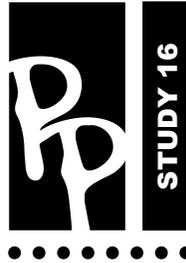


Adopted into the family

With all the benefits



## Galatians 4:1-7

This Study Paper contains the following

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Note on Galatians 3 and 4
- 📁 A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point 1: Preaching the doctrines of Election and Predestination
- 📁 Focus Point 2: The Apostles' Creed
- 📁 Over to you

### Introduction to the passage

Paul is very concerned for the Galatians and does not want them to be led astray by the false teaching they are hearing. He has been going into considerable detail in different ways to try and show the Galatians their error; and to convince them as to why the way he had taught them God's grace was the only realistic path they should take. He has warned them of the consequences of anyone who teaches a false gospel; that what he had brought to them was directly given to him by Christ and verified by the other apostles. He had opposed Peter when he had behaved hypocritically and reminded the Galatians of their original conversion. Paul had explained the promise given to Abraham and how that had come before the law received by Moses. The law could not amend the promise and had been given to show the Jewish people that it was impossible for any human being to keep the law. The only way to God was the way Abraham took, believing by faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The law was added for a time, which would end with the coming of the Seed, Jesus Christ. Anyone who believed in Christ would be of the seed of Abraham. There is no distinction

between those who have been given the gift of faith to believe in Christ. They are united, being the sons of God and heirs according to the promise. In the opening verses of chapter 4 Paul develops further the privileges of being a son of God, the heir to a great inheritance.

### What these verses mean

Verse 1

***What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child,***

Paul has already described (3:23,24) the Old Testament period as a time when all were (1) in prison under law (because unable to keep it perfectly) and (2) under the supervision of a child supervisor (because law dictated their behaviour). Now Paul describes the Old Testament period as a time when all were spiritually immature children because they did not know the heritage of full spiritual life which Christ would give. This again shows the folly of those who taught that Old Testament ceremonies were necessary to salvation in New Testament times. The Old Testament was a time of immaturity!

***he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate.***

An heir does not always have immediate access to the inheritance. The heir may have to wait for the parents to die, or the parent may have put the inheritance in trust until the child reaches a certain age. Either way the child is assured of the inheritance long before he receives it. During this period the child is not old enough to handle the responsibility of the inheritance and is therefore no different from being a slave.

Verse 2

***He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.***

When the child reaches the age of maturity, he ceases to be under supervision. He is free to enjoy his inheritance in full. Until that time, which is set by his father, the child is under supervision and does not have the inheritance to use. Paul is describing the situation that existed for the believing Jews who lived in the Old Testament period and looked forward in faith to the coming of the Messiah. At the same time Paul is using this illustration to show the Galatians that it applies to them as well in the period after the Messiah had come. It is relevant for us today. Before we trusted in Christ for salvation, we were in God's eyes chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). We were like children unaware of this, in bondage to sin until our conversion to Christ. Paul develops this further in the next verse.

Paul will argue in verse 7 that Christian believers are no longer under the law but share in the Spirit of Christ (verse 6). The first coming of Christ was the time appointed by God for this new age to begin.

Verse 3

So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.

The phrase “basic principles” means the elementary, rudimentary facts: e.g. those things taught in the infant class. The word “world” is to be understood as meaning “humanity”. Before Christ came, mankind was in a state of spiritual immaturity in which life was shaped by observance of rules and ceremonies just as infants learn by rote. For the Jews (“we” in this verse) the ceremonies were of the Mosaic law: for the Gentiles (“you” in verse 8) the ceremonies were of pagan religion. In **both** cases it was the same sort of slavery to empty ceremonies, which could not save. The performing of Jewish ceremonies without faith to understand them was no better than Gentile practices. And the same is true of the religion of nominal Christians. This is the condition of every person before his or her spiritual conversion to Christ. They think that they can please God by behaving in accordance with an external religious ritual or set of rules. These are the basic principles of the world.

Verse 4

But when the time had fully come, The child-heirs do not remain children for ever. There is an end to their slavery as there is an end to childhood and the coming of adulthood. This little sentence marking the end of childhood is very important in the history of the world. The term “when the time had fully come” means much.

**When the time had fully come**

1. It was the moment that God had always had in mind when his Son should come.
2. It was the time that had been foretold by the prophets; cf. Daniel 9:25.
3. It was the time when the Gentile world had learned that despite Greek and Roman civilisation, mankind was still sinful.
4. It was the time when the Jewish world had learned that despite all God’s favours to them, they were still sinners.
5. The Greek language had become a universal language, making it easy for the spread of the gospel by speech and writing.
6. The Roman empire had produced world peace, making it easy for missionary travel.

Christianity has its roots in history, events that took place. No other religion or philosophy is so dependent upon such facts.

**God sent his Son,**

The Greek word “sent” means “to send someone out on a specific task”; i.e. to redeem (verse 5). Notice that Jesus was God’s Son **before** he came to earth.

**born of a woman, born under law;**

Christ was **truly human**. As a Jew, he was subject to the law. There is no need to say we need the help of Mary, a woman, to represent us to God, for Christ was also fully human. He understands us (Heb. 2:18). Christ **truly obeyed** every desire of God’s will. He lived under the authority of his Father; he died to take away the penalty of law-breaking that we have done.

Verse 5

**to redeem those under law,**

The reason for God sending his Son to earth was to redeem those who are under the law. In Study 12 comment is made about chapter 3:13 that redemption is like the slave who is bought from bondage to an owner and set free (page 101). In this context the bondage is the law, representing the impossibility of our making things right with God. Our sin imprisons us, we are in bondage to sin. But Christ pays the price, through his death, so that we can be freed from this slavery. However Christ did not die just so that he could buy our freedom from the slavery of sin. Our redemption leads on to something else, a special status with God.

**that we might receive the full rights of sons.**

Our redemption leads to our becoming one of God’s children. It was common in Paul’s day for wealthy families to adopt a son and make him a full member of that family. Paul uses this as a picture of how God takes believers as his children. God used similar language of the Jews: see Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1. God spiritually adopts the redeemed sinner who now has a legal status of son and heir. It guarantees that person the inheritance that can never be taken away. Part of that inheritance is eternal life. Such a person was chosen by God before they were even born, but until they experienced their spiritual rebirth and trusted in Christ, they were like the child-heir, unaware of their position. Now in their converted state, they begin to understand what Christ’s death means for them personally. They are rescued from slavery and adopted by God into his family.

Verse 6

**Because you are sons,**

This idea of a person being chosen by God is emphasised by the order

in which things are described in this verse. In conversion, the Spirit of God cleanses the person (Titus 3:5-6) and then indwells the new believer. But Paul says that God sends the Spirit of his Son (Holy Spirit) because we are already sons. In other words we are not sons because the Holy Spirit has been sent to us. Rather, the status of being an adopted child of God is reserved for all those God has chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). That is why the Scriptures refer to Christian believers as the “elect”.

**God sent the Spirit of his Son**

The same word “sent” is used of the Spirit as of the Son (verse 4). The Spirit comes to a person as part of their regeneration <sup>1</sup> with a special task; i.e. to cause us to cry, “Abba, Father.” Compare also Romans 8:15.

**into our hearts,**

The “heart” in Bible usage usually means the whole personality, the thoughts, emotions and the will (Prov. 4:23; 23:7). The Spirit lives in our whole personality causing us to cry to God as our spiritual Father. Compare also 1 Corinthians 12:3.

**the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”**

We are now told the special task of the Holy Spirit. The meaning of “calls out” here is a strong word meaning “to cry out because of deep feeling”. It is used, for example, of Jesus in Matthew 27:50. “Abba” was the popular word used in **Hebrew** to mean “Father”. <sup>2</sup> “Father” is a translation of the **Greek** word meaning “Father”. So both Jews and Greeks are brought by the Spirit to feel the same need of God as Father. The Holy Spirit indwells the believer and confirms to the believer his status. How else would a person cry to God the Father from the heart? This brings reassurance to the believer

Verse 7

**So you are no longer a slave, but a son;**

The presence of the Holy Spirit is the proof that a person is a full child of God. After Christ’s coming believers enjoy the Spirit’s presence in a way unknown before Christ. So God’s people nowadays are not slaves to laws as they once had to be. Being now possessed of the Spirit of Christ, they live in a Christlike way. This should be the experience of all believers. Before their conversion they were slaves to the thinking of this world that required their following rules and ritual. They are no longer of that way, but experience the privileges and enjoyment of being adopted into God’s family.

**and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.**

Under Roman law all children, including adopted children, in a family

inherited equally the family wealth. So now, all believers being adopted into his family “by God” are inheritors of the divine wealth. This is impossible to define or to fully imagine. Heaven, joy, peace, glory, praise will all be part of this experience, but until we arrive it will be like looking at a mirror dimly and seeing a poor reflection (1 Co. 13:12). Notice how Paul switches to the singular “son” to show that every believer enjoys these privileges in his own right. If every believer is an heir, why do they need to turn to and rely on the law?

We may have in these verses an early form of a doctrinal creed. <sup>3</sup>

“God sent his Son Born of a woman, born under law To redeem us That we might be sons.	the sending of the Son
Because we are sons God has sent the Spirit of his Son Into our hearts Crying, “Abba, Father.”	the sending of the Spirit

P

## Summary

God has chosen his people, the elect, from before the foundation of the world. Until the time of their regeneration they are kept in bondage to the beliefs and powers that control the world. For the believing Jew, the period of bondage was terminated by the coming of Christ at the appointed time. For the elect generally, their bondage is terminated at God’s appointed time by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Being born of a woman, Christ became one of us. Being born under the law, he kept the law perfectly. He was therefore fully qualified to become our substitute and to redeem his people from the curse and condemnation of the law. This work of redemption was a

*Summary continued on page 7*

<sup>3</sup> A creed is a statement of what believers believe, based on Scripture. There appear to be early creeds in the New Testament (see for example Matthew 28:19, words used for baptising converts). Creeds were used for the instruction of converts. Creeds were also used by the early church as a means of responding to teaching that was not in accord with that of the apostles. Examples of these are the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed (known and used by the fourth century believers) and the Athanasian Creed (possibly fifth century). See Focus Point on the Apostles’ Creed (page 10).

Summary continued from page 6

means to an end, namely the adoption of the elect as God's children and heirs. The inheritance that believers receive is beyond our present understanding. It is obtained only in and through Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>



## Note on Galatians 3 and 4

Galatians chapters 3 and 4 have the same theme: by human effort to keep laws, no one is justified in God's sight. Only through faith in Christ is salvation possible. Yet chapter 4 is not merely an empty repetition of chapter 3.

Paul has argued so much about this subject, taking two chapters where we might feel one would do, because he loved the Galatian believers so dearly (see 4:19,20). Paul wanted to use every possible argument to prevent them from being misled.

- |                                   |              |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. their own spiritual experience | 1-5          |
| 2. Abraham's experience           | 6-17         |
| 3. the law of Moses               | 10-13; 18-24 |
| 4. Habakkuk's prophecy            | 11           |

In chapter 4 Paul uses **four more** arguments;

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| 5. the coming of Christ                | 1-5   |
| 6. the coming of the Spirit            | 6-7   |
| 7. the coming of the gospel to Galatia | 8-20  |
| 8. the story of Sarah and Hagar        | 21-31 |

**All eight** arguments show that salvation is not obtained by our human efforts, but is received by faith as God's gracious gift.

Yet how many people in our world today are still trying to please God by religious ceremonies – Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist **and** nominal Christian too!

<sup>4</sup> Edgar Andrews, *Free in Christ* (Evangelical Press).



## A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

### Heirs of God! Galatians 4: 4 – 7

There is a sense in which all people are God's people because God created all people. But all people are not **heirs** of God.

Many people hate God; are afraid of God; ignore God; rebel against God; misrepresent God; have no wish to think about God. They are obviously **not** God's people in the biblical sense of possessing God's nature, or of being his born again children.

#### 1. The wonder of being an heir of God

- No one can disinherit you, for no one can alter God's will.
- The value of your inheritance can never diminish for it is eternal – "of God"!
- The inheritance cannot be exhausted, for God is for ever.

The heir is delivered from the greatest evil, crowned with the greatest blessing (v.5)!

#### 2. It is God who makes us his heirs, not we by our efforts (verse 7)

- Who designed the Mosaic law, to prepare for Christ's coming?
- Who inspired the prophets to tell of Christ's coming?
- Who fixed the advantageous time of Christ's coming?
- Who sent the Son to redeem?
- Who sent the Spirit?

The whole of the Trinity is involved in this work, nothing of our efforts.

#### 3. People are made heirs by the unique work of the Son and Spirit (verses 4, 6)

##### (a) **Jesus the suitable mediator:**

Born of woman – i.e. human: he can be our substitute.

Son of God - i.e. divine: he can make us sons of God.

Born under law - i.e. to fulfil what we should have done.

##### (b) **The Spirit the suitable comforter:**

As Spirit, he can dwell in us.

As the Spirit of Christ, he can make us Christlike.

As the Spirit of God, he knows the divine mind.

In no other faith is there such a unique way of salvation!

The only sign of persons being heirs of God (verse 6) is the spiritual desire arising within them to love God as Father, to do his will, to enjoy his favour, to receive his Word. Only by trusting Christ as God's appointed Saviour is the way to God, as our Father, open for us. There is no other way to be an heir. Our heirship is jointly "with Christ" (Rom. 8:17).

 **Focus Point 1:**  
**Preaching the doctrines of Election and Predestination**

The doctrines of election and predestination are straightforward to understand, but more difficult for the human mind to accept. This is because they take salvation away from the human will and place it in the hands of a sovereign God. This then brings accusations from the human perspective that this is unfair. Paul deals with this argument in his letter to the Romans (9:14). There, Paul declares that God is just, everything he does is perfectly right. All deserve to receive his condemnation, yet when he chooses to save people, God is acting in a merciful way. His purpose in choosing is not to condemn but to save.

The difficulty for preachers is to try and use such doctrines as a basis of a sermon. Yet these doctrines are not to be neglected and regenerate people need to hear about them so that their understanding of the nature and character of God is clear and accurate. Their perspective changes wholly, influencing their prayer life and Christian service. The difficulty with preaching doctrine is that it can come over in an uninteresting way. The solution is not to attempt to use doctrine as the main theme of a sermon. Rather, let the doctrine rise naturally out of a passage of Scripture that is being preached. This study is a good example. We have looked at the text and explained what it means. In this explanation the doctrine of election has come up. The subject of the passage is not election but the privileges we have as being sons and heirs through Christ.. To understand the meaning of the passage we have had to consider the subject of election. If we tried to make sense of what the apostle Paul is saying without this doctrine, we would end up being confused.

There are many passages in Scripture where we see God acting sovereignly and choosing. The Old Testament is full of such examples and the New Testament makes a number of references to election and predestination.

Remember the golden rule of preaching: let the text dominate your sermon. After all, you are only the messenger and not the author. Preach in the way the Holy Spirit, as the author, has presented the Scriptures to us.

**Election**

The act of choosing. The nation of Israel was elect (Is. 45:4). The Messiah was elect (Is. 42:1). Christian believers are people whom God has chosen in Christ so that they may be holy (set apart for him). This election was made before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13).

*A Dictionary of Theological Terms (Grace Publications).*

 **Focus Point 2:**  
**The Apostles' Creed**

On the last evening that Jesus spent with his disciples, he continued to prepare them for his departure and for the work of the gospel to be continued in his absence. Jesus promised to send his Spirit, who would testify to the world of Jesus (John 15:26). God decreed that those who became true followers of Jesus would also be involved in telling the world of Jesus. It would start with the apostles, the group of men Jesus was instructing on the last night. They would be important witnesses as to who Jesus is, as they were with him for the whole length of his public ministry.

The apostles founded the first churches and taught the first generation of believers. Gradually the teaching of the apostles appeared in writing and the Church accepted these as genuine Scripture. These writings were placed alongside the Old Testament Scriptures and became accepted as the New Testament. The Church followed the apostolic teaching and used them to prevent any new teachings coming in.

One of the main threats the early Church faced was the Gnostic movement. It reached its peak in the second century although it began before the birth of Christianity. The early Church leaders agreed that it was Simon the Magician (Acts 8:9-24) who was the source of the Christian version of Gnosticism. This movement represented a variety of different groups who shared a number of basic beliefs. They all claimed to possess a special knowledge of spiritual truth ("gnosis" is the Greek for "knowledge"). They claimed that they, not the true Church, were the

real Christians. This special knowledge was not available to the ordinary believing person. The Gnostics had argued that Jesus had taught this special knowledge to the apostles and they had passed it down to the Gnostics. Without this special knowledge the Gnostics claimed the Scriptures could not be correctly understood.

The Gnostic threat prompted the Church to place great emphasis on apostolic teaching. This had been preserved in the churches where the apostles taught and handed down to subsequent generations. One way in which these apostolic teachings were preserved was by churches having a rule of faith. Each church had its own version of its rule of faith, but they all taught the same thing. The rule of faith was a summary of the apostles' teaching. There was only one church in the western world that could claim direct apostolic teaching and that was the church in Rome. Both Peter and Paul taught in the church, Paul having also written a letter which is now part of the New Testament (Romans). The rule of faith in the Roman church became known as the Apostles' Creed.

The preservation of apostolic teaching and writing was very important for the early Church to fight the Gnostic movement. There was no secret knowledge that the apostles had passed on. The apostle Paul himself told the Elders from the church at Ephesus that he had not hesitated in proclaiming the whole will of God to them (Acts 20:27). Jesus told the disciples on that last night that everything he had learned from the Father he had passed on to them (John 15:15). The disciples in turn were to continue as witnesses for Jesus and take the gospel to all nations and make disciples. This included teaching the new disciples everything that Jesus had commanded (Matt. 28:20).

What we know today as the Apostles' Creed is not Scripture itself, but is a good summary of the important teaching of Scripture and therefore is very helpful. What we need to remember with all creeds is to test what they state by seeing if they agree with the Bible. The Apostles' Creed is a good example of an accurate statement of biblical teaching.

### **The Apostles' Creed**

I believe in God,  
the Father Almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
And in Jesus Christ,  
His only Son,  
our Lord,  
Who was born of the virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified,  
died and was buried.  
On the third day He rose again.  
He ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,  
from where He will come again  
to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Catholic Church,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life everlasting.

Source: Some of the above information was taken from *2000 Years of Christ's Power (Part One)*; N. R. Needham (Grace Publications).



### **Over to you**

After studying the letter so far, do you view your own conversion experience in the same way that you did before? How would you describe your Christian experience now?

As a pastor or preacher do you consider that this study has made your task easier or more difficult to cope with? Explain why?

What encouragements can you give to your believing people from the Bible passage of this study?