

Children of God Gal 3:26-4:7

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What is a Christian?

Many people would give different answers to that question. And indeed you can legitimately approach it from different angles. There are many different facets of being a follower of Jesus that the Scriptures reveal to us.

I imagine that for many of us, a simple answer to that question is, "Someone who has their sins forgiven by faith in Jesus Christ". A Christian is someone who has their sins forgiven by faith in Jesus Christ.

Hopefully if you've been coming along over the last few weeks, you will recognise that Paul has been urging the Galatians to get on board with that message.

Salvation comes by faith, not by the works of the law.

But we don't want to stop there.

There is more to say about our salvation.

Wondrous things that should make us sing for joy.

One of the most heart rending things I have watched was a story about children in orphanages in Rumania.

Kids basically left in cots for years.

Filthy dirty, no playtime outside the cot, no human contact, no love.

And so when a person came to adopt a child, the first message was,

'I'm going to get this child out of this hell hole.'

If we draw an analogy to our salvation, that's like the forgiveness of sins.

All the bad stuff is taken away.

But that's not the end of the story.

The second message is,

'I'm going to give this child a loving family,

a home where they feel loved and cared for,
a place to live where they can grow and develop as a person.'
If we draw an analogy to our salvation,
this is us becoming children of God.

What is a Christian?

Yes it is someone who has their sins forgiven by faith in Jesus Christ,
but it is also someone who is adopted as a child of God.

Our reading begins 3:26,

"So in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith."

Paul has now moved from addressing the subject
of the record of our wrongs being cancelled
and he has moved to the glorious new life that God has for us.
And that begins with us becoming 'children of God'.

In Christian theology,

this idea that we are children of God is called adoption.

We were not children of God by birth.

But we have been made children of God by adoption.

By faith in Christ Jesus, we are now grafted into God's family.

As you look around the world,

it becomes clear that what family you are part of
makes an enormous difference to how your life goes.

Much success in the business world can come from family connections.

Much educational achievement can come from having parents
who read to their children and encourage learning at a young age.

Much character development comes from the values
that are taught and modelled in your family.

If the family you are part of is important,
how good is it to be adopted into God's family?

We've been taken out of the orphanage,

with all its shortcomings,

and grafted into the family of our creator and our king.

What does it mean to be adopted into God's family?

Four things.

Firstly, new clothes. 3:27

"For all of you who were baptised into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ."

No parent picking up their newly adopted child from the orphanage
leaves them in the clothes they were wearing at the orphanage.

Orphanage rags are the first thing to go.

What new clothes are given to the child of God?

We are given Jesus to wear.

When God looks at us, he sees Jesus.

I wonder if you've ever felt like God tolerates you
because you let him down so often.

You know you are forgiven by the blood of Jesus.

But forgiven doesn't mean liked.

Friends we are not tolerated by God,
we are loved by God.

When God looks at you he sees Jesus,
you are clothed with Christ.

And when he sees Jesus,

he sees someone who fills his heart with love.

He doesn't merely tolerate you because of your sin.

Why not?

Because your sin has been dealt with.

It's taken away.

Now when he looks at you,

he sees the perfection of Jesus.

To be adopted into God's family means we are clothed with Christ.

What does it mean to be adopted into God's family?

Second thing - family unity. 3:28

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile,

neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female,

for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

When families are working well,

the members of the family will stick together.

There is a saying,

blood is thicker than water.

It means family ties are stronger than friendship ties.

And when we are adopted as God's children,
we become part of a united family.

I've experienced the joy of that Christian unity.

It's easy to take it for granted in your local church.

In fact it's easy to see all the tensions
that threaten the unity of your local church.

But when you go to a strange place
and particularly when you are feeling alone,
it is wonderful to have a family to welcome you in.

When I was in the summer holidays of my third year at Uni,

I went up picking raspberries in the Yarra Valley.

I pitched my tent at a caravan park Yarra Junction
and rode my bike to berry farm each day except Sunday.

Six days a week, I was without friends and family.

On Sunday, I rode my bike to the local church.

It was a Brethren Assembly actually.

And the folk there made an effort to get to know me.

They invited me back to lunch

at a couple of their houses over that summer.

And I felt like I had family.

Family unity is a wonderful blessing of our adoption into God's family.

But there is a somewhat tricky question.

What are the social implications of our unity?

It's clear that our unity in God's family is primarily salvation unity.

"In Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith."

It's about salvation, right?

But what social effects does that have?

We can't say that it's only about salvation and has no social effects.

Paul has been at pains to point out the error that Peter fell into

when he wouldn't share meals with the Gentile believers at Antioch.

Clearly 'no Jew nor Gentile' means we can't withdraw from one another.

But in other places Paul allows

that there will still be slave and free in the church,
and he counsels the slaves to be contented with their situation
and serve their masters as if serving the Lord Jesus.
So when he says there is no slave or free,
he's not abolishing the institution of slavery amongst Christians.
And yet in another place, he includes slave traders
amongst a list of behaviours that don't conform to the gospel.
I think it would take a whole sermon devoted to this one question,
to try to form an answer.

It's complicated.

You'll notice that I haven't even mentioned the most tricky pair,
male and female.

But Paul has lots of teaching devoted to the distinctions
between what it means to live faithfully
as a Christian man and a Christian woman
and as a Christian husband and a Christian wife.

But from this verse, I want to simply exclude some extreme positions.
Some have said that this verse has no social implications
because it's primarily about salvation.

That's clearly wrong because the gospel always has social implications,
and the second half of chapter 2 of Galatians
is all about one of those social implications.

But on the other hand,
others have said that this verse should be used
as a reason to abolish all social distinctions.

Well that just doesn't fit the witness of the NT as a whole.

And as the Bible is God's Word,
we read it as making sense as a whole.

We don't cherry pick the bits we like
and ignore the bits that call on us to change our views.

To be adopted into God's family means we are united with our family.

Thirdly, to be adopted into God's family
means we have a family heritage. 3:29

"If you belong to Christ then you are Abraham's seed."
Having a family heritage seems to matter to some people.
I get contacted by various people
who are trying to trace their ancestors
through the church's marriage and baptism records.
And every time I move into a new community,
I soon learn who are the people
who are 3rd generation Hastings or Healesville or wherever I might be.
And even if I don't feel any particular connection
to what the Andersons or Davises have done in generations past,
I still have tried to teach my kids some of the things
that have shaped me as a person.
They've had my favourite children's books read to them.
They've been taught a musical instrument each.
And have had the importance of Maths emphasised
in their educational endeavours
(which has been more appreciated by some than others).
But when we are adopted by God,
we get the heritage of a new family.
We are Abraham's seed.
Who am I?
is one of the signature questions of our age.
And who we feel connected to
shapes the answer we give to that question.
Whoever else we might feel connected to,
we are Abraham's seed.
And that means the promises made to Abraham are our promises.
And when we read of the heroes of the faith,
whether that's the heroes of Hebrews 11: Abel, Noah, Joseph, Moses;
or if it's heroes
like Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Edwards and Billy Graham,
these are not just figures out of history,
these are our family.
To be adopted into God's family
means we have a family heritage.

Fourthly, to be adopted into God's family means that you are an heir.
This is chapter 4:1-7.

What does it mean to be an heir?

It means you inherit what belongs to your Father.

And there are two stages to being an heir.

You can be the one to whom something is promised.

And then when the person dies,

you actually receive the promised inheritance.

Now every analogy breaks down at a point.

In our world, to inherit, your parents need to die.

And God will never die.

Instead there's a different time

when we move

from being heirs to whom an inheritance is promised,

to being those who actually inherit.

Now most Christians

if they were going to guess at Paul's answer

to when we inherit would say,

"It's when we die.

That's when we get to be part of God's Kingdom.

That's when we get eternal life."

But Paul has a different answer.

He says,

"We inherit when Jesus came."

You see the heroes of the faith in the Old Testament,

guys like Abraham and Moses,

they had promises,

but for the most part,

they didn't see the fulfilment of the promises.

But we see the fulfilment of the promise.

And so you ask me,

how is it that I see the fulfilment of promise.

I'm not in heaven yet,

I'm still waiting.

But Paul tells us 4:5
that we have already received our adoption to sonship.
Even though the great heroes of the faith were in fact sons,
they were no better than slaves,
because the inheritance was controlled by guardians.
It's only now that Jesus has come,
that we actually have access to our inheritance.
What do we have that Abraham and Moses didn't have?

The answer Paul tells us 4:6 is,
"Because you are his sons,
God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts."
The great mark of being a child of God is having the Holy Spirit.
Believers in the OT did not in general have the Holy Spirit.
Some were given the Spirit to empower them for a particular task.
But now the Holy Spirit is poured out on all God's people.
And that is the marker that we are truly God's children.

How do you know that you have the Holy Spirit?
"God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,
the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'."
Paul was not talking about a Swedish pop group from the 1970s
who seems to be played in the Anderson household incessantly.
Abba was the Aramaic word for 'Daddy'.
Which is a very interesting word for Paul to write to the Galatians
because they didn't speak Aramaic.
Aramaic was the language that Jesus' disciples would have spoken.
But Greek was the language of the Galatians.
So why does Paul say that the Spirit calls out Abba?
Because it was a very personal intimate way to address your Father.
There wasn't a Greek equivalent.
It's like there's a daughter in our house who will say,
"Daddy, can we have an ice cream?"
And sometimes she will get what she wants
because Daddies love their children.

How do you know you have the Holy Spirit?

Because you can speak to God intimately in prayer.

Because you can speak with the familiarity of a child to a Father.

Here's a great quote from Tim Keller.

"Just as a child does not prepare speeches for his or her parents,

so Christians experiencing this work of the Spirit

experience a great spontaneity and reality in prayer.

Praying is no longer mechanical and formal,

but filled with warmth, passion and freedom."

Now I would add to this,

that prayer is not always like that in my experience.

Sometimes it feels like hard work.

Just because we have the inheritance of a child of God

doesn't mean we always grasp hold of it with both hands.

It's possible to be a child of God

and still live like a slave.

We'll hear more about that in next week's passage.

But we have the possibility of warmth, passion and freedom in prayer

because we are children of God.

Here's another Keller quote.

"Abba ... signifies a confidence of love and assurance of welcome.

Just as a young child simply assumes

that a parent loves them and is there for them,

and never doubts the security and openness of Daddy's strong arms,

so Christians can have a boldness and certainty

that God loves them endlessly."

What this is basically telling us is that we are children of God,

so we can relate to God like a child.

That is our inheritance, or the first fruits of it.

We don't relate to God like slaves.

Slaves fear their master.

Slaves have to make sure they do the right thing

or they will face the consequences.

We relate to God like children,

confident in the trust that the maker of the universe loves us.

Friends we have been adopted into God's family.

That means four things for us.

1. We have new clothes.

We are clothed with Christ.

When God looks at us, he sees Jesus.

And that means he loves what he sees.

2. To be adopted into God's family means we are united with that family.

The barriers that divide humanity are torn down.

3. To be adopted into God's family means we have a family heritage.

When we ask the question, "who am I?"

the answer is 'I am part of this family'.

I find my identity with them.

4. To be adopted into God's family means to be an heir.

To be an heir means to have the Spirit of Jesus living in your heart.

It means to have the freedom to relate to God as a child,

with all the security freedom and confidence that comes with that.

It's a tremendous privilege to be a child of God.

Let's thank him for it

with all the freedom of a child relating to a loving Father.