“ABBA, FATHER”

Galatians 4:1–7

Key Verse: 4:6

“Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’”

Little children are fascinating; though they’re constantly learning, *we* can learn so much from *them*. Watching a little toddler run to her father and call him “daddy” can really touch our hearts. This, Paul is saying in today’s passage, is the kind of relationship we should actually be having with God: running to him with great joy, affection and trust. It’s a relationship in which there are no rules, no expectations—only love. Sadly, today so many people have a distant, complicated or totally broken relationship with their human fathers. They can’t just run to them anytime, call them “daddy,” and have everything solved. But in Christ our Father God is inviting us into an intimate love relationship with him, a relationship so authentic, affirming and available to us at any time. In today’s study we want to learn how we can experience such a relationship with God.

As we’ve seen, throughout this letter Paul is emphasizing the amazing grace and freedom we have when we believe in Jesus. Because of this grace and freedom, we’re no longer enslaved to keeping laws in order to stay out of trouble with God. At the end of chapter 3 Paul proclaimed that we’re all children of God through faith in Jesus. Now he continues to explain how in Christ we have a new identity and new relationship with God.

Read verses 1,2. Paul uses the example of a wealthy underage heir. Such a wealthy underage heir owns the whole estate. But while waiting to become an adult, his status in the household is like a slave. He has no legal or property rights. He’s under guardians and trustees. They discipline him, telling him when to wake up, when to go to school, what to wear, how to behave, and when to go to bed. It’s kind of like slavery. His father sets a time when he can legally inherit everything. Until then, he has to wait. Paul uses this example to describe the situation of the Jews before Jesus came. They had to live under the law and wait for God’s promises to come true. But he expands it to apply to Gentiles, too.

Read verse 3. Here Paul identifies with his Gentile audience. And he says that they, too, had a similar experience before believing in Jesus. He says they were “in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world.” Here, the one word in Greek translated here as “the elemental spiritual forces” is like our English expression “the ABCs” or “the basics.” But this Greek word had a spiritual dimension. In Persian religious texts, magical writings and astrological documents this word was widely used to represent spirits. Paul was writing to Gentiles who didn’t have God’s laws but their own kind of laws. They believed the universe was ruled by the spiritual forces of the basic elements of air, water, fire and earth, which they worshiped. To live in harmony with these natural elements and appease the spiritual forces behind them, they resorted to following all kinds of rules. Their superstition made them legalistic, and spiritually speaking, they were dominated by demons. They were fearful, and their whole approach to religion was duty-bound and slavish.

Today it may seem that because of technology and education that we aren’t superstitious anymore. But we are. When we talk about something we hope will happen, we knock on wood, for good luck. When young people look up at night at a starry sky and see a special star, they’ll say a wish, believing it will happen. When carving a chicken and finding a wishbone, we break it to see if we can make a wish. We think that when we find a heads-up penny, we'll have good fortune. Little children think that if they step on a crack, they’ll break their mother’s back. When someone sneezes, we think it’s important to say, “bless you.” We won’t open an umbrella inside a building, thinking it’s bad luck. When we see a broken mirror, or a bat, or a black cat, or a crow or a spider, we get scared. For some people, slavery to superstitions can be intense, even panicky. Some even approach Christian life like this. They think that if they engage in religious activities diligently, such as using the sign of the cross, or praying, or going to church, or reading the Bible, they’ll be safe. But deep within them, they’re ruled by fear of the dark forces of this world. The gospel of Jesus needs to penetrate deeply enough within us to set us free from such fears.

Read verses 4,5. First, we notice here that Jesus came at “the set time.” It means that God determined the right time for Jesus to come. God is still in control of this world. The “set time” also symbolizes when people are truly ready to receive Jesus. God didn’t rush this time, and we can’t, either. We can’t force people to accept the gospel; we have to pray and wait patiently for God’s time.

Next, it says that “God sent his Son.” It means Jesus the Son existed with the Father and shared his glory before he came into this world, and even before the world was created (Jn17:5). Jesus is God the Son, who existed in eternity. But God the Father “sent” him into this world, this world full of darkness, sin and all kinds of crazy notions about God. God sent his Son to reveal himself to us (Jn1:18; Heb1:1–3). God sent his Son to reveal his great love for us (Jn3:16).

Then it says that God's Son was “born of a woman.” This was to fulfill the ancient prophecy that God would send the offspring of woman to crush the head of Satan (Ge3:15). It fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that a virgin would be with child and give birth to a son, who would be called “Immanuel—God with us” (Isa7:14; Mt1:21). Born of a woman, God’s Son would become fully human, just like us in every way, so that he might break the power of the devil over us, empathize with us, and save us from our temptations (Heb2:14–18; 4:14,15).

Next, it says he was “born under the law, to redeem those under the law.” When he was born, Jesus’ parents had to keep the laws of circumcising and presenting their firstborn son to God and making the prescribed offering (Lk2:22–24). Jesus kept the Passover, the Ten Commandments, and all the other laws Jews kept, not to show us to keep those laws, but to redeem us from them. The word “redeem” means to “pay the price.” Jesus paid the price for us to be set free from the law when he died on the cross. On the cross Jesus fully satisfied all the law’s demands. As Paul said back in chapter 1, he “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age” (1:4). Through accepting his death on the cross, we’re redeemed, meaning we’re completely forgiven by God. All our sins, past, present and future, have been paid for.

Finally, it says that “we might receive adoption to sonship.” Through Jesus’ death on the cross, God paid all the adoption price to make us his own lovely sons and daughters. We’re no longer slaves of sin and Satan, but children of God, bought with the blood of Jesus. As God’s children, as Paul said at the end of chapter 3, we're also his heirs (3:29). He wrote in Romans that we're “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Ro8:17). It’s nothing but amazing grace that slaves of sin like us can become heirs of God and even co-heirs with Christ. Why does Paul emphasize that we're heirs? It’s to help us get rid of our slave mentality. Each of us needs to deeply realize that through Jesus, God has adopted me to be his own child and heir of his kingdom. As an old hymn puts it, “I’m a child of the King!” As God’s children and heirs, we’re royal sons and daughters, and his treasured possession (1Pe2:9).

How we view ourselves is a most serious matter. Some people think too highly of themselves. But most people have self-loathing. This began actually in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve sinned against God and were full of shame for what they'd done. When we think we don’t matter, that we’re worthless, or inferior, or messed up, or doomed, we haven’t really accepted the gospel. Some people seem to believe in Jesus, but they haven’t deeply accepted what Jesus has done for them, so they’re still full of self-hatred. This cripples them spiritually. Jesus redeemed us so that we might be adopted as God’s precious children and heirs of his kingdom. The great, eternal God loves me and sees me in Christ as his lovely child, the apple of his eye, the one he wants to be with forever. By faith in Jesus we can be sure of this.

How can we really see ourselves like this? Even if someone tells us, we can’t really accept it. How can we experience it? Read verse 6. When we believe in Jesus, God gives us his Spirit (3:2). His Spirit convinces us of the overflowing love of God for us (Ro5:5). His Spirit convinces us that we really are God’s precious children (Ro8:15,16). The Spirit enables us to call out, “Abba, Father.” It’s the most intimate language we could ever use to address God. Here the Greek verb “calls out” literally means to scream, shriek, or cry aloud. It’s the same way Jesus called out to God just before he was arrested (Mk14:36). Likewise, we’ll cry out like that only when we’re really desperate. When we’re struggling in life, when we’re facing all kinds of problems that make us helpless, when we’re feeling scared, or lonely, or tempted, we can cry out, “Abba, Father!” And our loving heavenly Father God hears us (1Jn5:14,15). He won’t ignore the cries of his beloved children (Lk18:7). This is not a cry of fear, but a cry of love. It’s not a cry of duty, but a cry of devotion, a heart that seeks to please him. Sometimes we’re struggling so much, and so weak, we don’t even know how to pray. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with wordless groans, and though we may not even understand ourselves, he understand us and helps us accept God’s will (Ro8:26,27). May God grant us his Spirit, so that we can have this beautiful, intimate love relationship with him. Through the Spirit of his Son, may God help us to cry out to him in faith and love, each and every day, whatever we’re going through.

Read verse 7. Paul again emphasizes our new status in Jesus. We’re no longer slaves, but children, and as his children, we’re also heirs. We need to let the gospel change us so that we no longer see ourselves as slaves of sin, but as heirs of God’s kingdom.

Today we learned that God made us his children and heirs through Jesus. We need to experience this intimate relationship with him through the Spirit. May God enable us to see ourselves as his lovely children, and see him as our loving, heavenly Father, who we can run to at any time. May God use us to bring this good news especially to college students today, that they might experience this amazing relationship with God.