

Galatians 4:1-3: Heirs of the Law

1 Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. 3 So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.

After laying out in the previous chapter about the distinction between the Law and the Promise and how one was a tutor to lead us to the other Paul moves to outline another problem of the law: the limitation of our ability to receive the fullness of the inheritance due to the relationship the Law puts Old Testament saints under. The context of the passage leads us to understand that Paul is still addressing the three tenets of the Abrahamic Covenant: the Land, the Seed and the Blessing that the Judaizers would have been focused on. They knew that God had promised Abraham and his descendents Canaan, and they knew they were a chosen race (from Abraham's loins) as well as that a descendent of David would always be seated on David's throne (Davidic Covenant 2 Samuel 7), and they also knew that they had the blessings of God coming from both the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 28) and the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31).

	Secular Heirship	Jewish/Legal Heirship
Position	Like a servant, his lordship is prospective	Serve under the Law
Function	Under the watch or care of a guardian or steward	The Law watches over the Old Testament saint to make sure that things are accomplished according to the provision of the Law
Temporally	The relationship of being a powerless, guarded individual continues until the appointed time chosen by the father	The relationship of being a powerless, guarded individual continues until the appointed time chosen by the Father

Exposition

Galatians 4:1-2

An heir was one who received an assigned portion of another person. In this case Paul outlines the weakness of the heirship that those under the Law had. While their portion was tremendous in earthly blessing as outlined in Deuteronomy 28:1-13, they also had conditions on which the blessing came, and if those conditions were not met then also the covenant specified earthly curses. The New Covenant

that the Jews were waiting for was (and is) imminent, but while they waited they were seen as though they were children.

The Greek word νήπιος (nēpios), translated as “young child” infers that someone is somewhere between an infant and a legally under-age child. Paul would know that his readers were familiar with the consequences of being a child verses adulthood in hiership and this term would serve to solidify the illustration. Just in case the reader failed to grasp the nuances Paul enunciates that it created the problem of being equivalent to a slave [δοῦλος (doulos)] and that the child’s will was second to his manager. Paul states that the child may have a coming authority [κύριος (kyrios)] by being an owner, but that the possession of the inheritance was yet to come. Chester McCalley states:

Galatians 4:1-7 must be viewed historically to be understood. In antiquity the moment of growing up was a climactic event. It carried both religious and legal significance. In Judaism, a boy entered manhood after his twelfth birthday, becoming a s “son of the law.” In the Greek world, this occurred at age eighteen. The same emphasis was upon the assumption of full responsibility as an adult. Under Roman law there was also a time for coming of age. There is evidence that this was not as fixed as the others, with the age of maturity left to the judgment of the father. It is probable that Paul is using the Roman custom as his illustration.¹

Furthermore it should be understood that being a son (or daughter) in Roman culture did not guarantee a part and parcel and that was it was not a full sonship until the father went through the ceremony.

Until a child was of legal age and had gone through the reception as a son the Roman culture would have viewed the child as being under supervision. Paul pushes this point by referencing both guardians and managers. A guardian would be set over the child and represented the father when the father was not present and was legally responsible for decisions when out and about. A manager would have been over the household as a whole and would be responsible for stewardship of the finances (cf: Genesis 24:3). The child would have been under the supervision of the guardian and the managers of the household until the appointed time. That time would could have been culturally significant (12 for Jews or 18 for Greeks) but also could have been dynamic due to the whims of the Roman father.

The significance of legal adult son heirship cannot be overstated: Paul’s accusers were trying to make these New Testament saints straddle a line they

¹ McCalley, Chester. *Galatians: A Commentary Outline*. 1st. Kansas City, KS: Word of Truth, 1988. 29. Print.

could not straddle. Just as one cannot be half pregnant or half trying, one cannot be half adult².

Cross References: Roman 8:16-17, Genesis 24:3

Questions for Discussion

Compare and contrast the differences of being a minor and an adult in the United States.

What legal contracts exist in the United States to cope with heirs that are children?

Why is it that Paul would describe the Law as being like a child that has not received sonship?

Why does Paul attack the Judaizers' definition of sonship?

Who were Israel's guardians? Who were their managers?

Galatians 4:3

Paul's emphasis on age and maturity must have spurred his readers to a place of emotional discomfort. To put it in modern vernacular: Nobody wants to be called a baby or a child! Then to put a finer point on it he uses the word bondage (related to the word used to describe the child as being like a slave in verse 1), but instead of just saying slave to the Law, he broadens his scope to refer to all earthly things. The gospel calls us to recognize a heavenly relationship and the identification truths are critical in understanding that earthly condition is of little to no value, and will be temporal. When referring to the elemental things of the world Paul uses a Greek term denoting earth, water, air and fire. More broadly it refers to the earthly conditions and earthly thinking that would constrain someone and leave them in bondage. Paul recognizes that the world and all of creation were put in place by the creator, but that mankind's attempt to come to the conclusions of God without God are futile and demand God's special revelation.

Cross Reference: Colossians 2:8

Questions for Discussion

Why would the Law be compared to the elemental things of the world?

What elemental things of the world do modern humans get caught up in?

What ways has man tried to 'get to God' but still sidestepped God's direct revelation for relationship?

What philosophical gaps exist when humans don't understand the creator-creation distinction?

² Someone will undoubtedly point out that age-wise someone can be halfway to 18, but one is either all the way 18, or not 18, but one is not 'kind of 18'