

# Born of a woman

## A study of Galatians 4

By Mike Morrison

**H**ow can Gentiles inherit the promises God gave to Abraham? Some people said that they ought to keep the laws of Moses if they want to be part of the covenant people. Paul said *no!* And he connects their inheritance with the birth of Jesus.

Paul ends chapter 3 by saying that Gentiles can inherit the promises of salvation without any need to keep the laws of Moses (Gal. 3:29). In chapter 4, Paul uses two analogies to explain what he means.

### The underage child (verses 1-3)

**What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate.** In the analogy Paul is creating, the child is Judaism. Jews had the promise of salvation, but not salvation itself. They were heirs, but had not yet inherited the blessings.

They were like underage children in another respect, too: They were under authority. In wealthy Greek families, children were supervised by slaves, and the children had to obey orders just as much as the slaves did. The child **is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.**

The law was “put in charge” for a while, but we are *no longer* under its supervision (3:24-25). People who put themselves under old covenant laws are putting themselves back into slavery, when the Father wants them to come out.

Paul includes himself in this description: **So also, when we [the Jews] were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.** These “basic principles” are the ABCs, the schoolwork done by elementary-age children. Before Christ, the Jews were under all the details of the Mosaic law. God was treating them like children—which was appropriate when they first came out of Egypt. But now the time had come for change.

### Coming of age (verses 4-7)

**But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law.** For this momentous transition in the relationship between God and his people, God did not send a prophet or a lawgiver—he sent his Son. But the Son did not descend from heaven like an angel—he came as a human being, born of a woman.

There is nothing strange about someone being born of a woman—birth is so normal that it is strange to make a point of it. Paul says that the Son of God was born of a woman because it was not what anyone expected. The Son of God, though divine, became a human infant—an underage child. Moreover, he was “born under the law”—obligated to keep the old covenant.

Why did the Lord of all creation become a child under the authority of the law? He did it **to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.** He became subject to the law so he could redeem people under the law. He had to become *one of them* in order to rescue them. He had to become human in order to rescue humans. Salvation depends on the fact that he was “born of a woman”—fully human. His birth has become one of the most celebrated holidays in Christianity.

Now that he has done this, we have the rights of adult children in two ways: 1) We are freed from the law, and 2) We have begun to experience the inheritance that God offers.

Paul addresses the Gentiles: **And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”** (4:6, NRSV). “Abba” is a term of respect and affection, similar to the English word “Dad,” used by children even after they become adults. We are adults who can call God our Dad. Since the Spirit who lived in Jesus also lives in us, we are God’s children.

The Spirit shows that God has elevated us: **So you are no longer slaves, but God’s children; and since you are his children, God has made you also heirs** (4:7, TNIV).

### The same two points.

#### Backwards into slavery? (verses 8-11)

Paul explains that Gentiles were enslaved, too: **Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.** Idolatry is oppressive.

**But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?** In other words, Now that God has treated you as adults, why would you want to go back to kindergarten? Paul is say-



ing, You have been freed from an oppressive religion; why would you want to be enslaved to basic principles again?

Indeed, the people were already keeping some unnecessary laws: **You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!** Have they given up on the grace they had in Christ? **I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.**

A focus on special times is childish. Our relationship with God is based on Christ and the Spirit, not on the calendar.

### Son of the slave woman (verses 21-31)

Starting in verse 21, Paul uses another analogy to dissuade them from the law: **Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?** Then he reminds them of the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16-21. He sees in it an ironic allegory.

**For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.** Ishmael was conceived in Hagar in the normal way; Isaac was conceived as a miracle, long after Sarah had passed menopause. One was the product of the flesh; the other was the result of God's promise.

Paul sees in this a useful parallel for the situation believers faced in Galatia. **These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar.**

The covenant from Sinai (the law of Moses) corresponds to the slave woman. The same religious system existed in Paul's day: **Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusa-**

**lem, because she is in slavery with her children.** In this allegory, the Judaizers and their followers are in slavery.

But we are children of Abraham in a different way, and we are in a spiritual reality: **But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. We, like Isaac, are children of promise.** We are children through faith in Christ, the promised seed of Abraham (3:16).

Paul sees one more parallel in the story, corresponding with the fact that Jews were persecuting people who felt freed from the law: **At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.**

So Paul quotes Gen. 21:10: **But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."** We will never inherit the promises of God by looking to the flesh, nor by looking to the calendar, nor by looking to the laws given on Mt. Sinai. We look to the child of promise—Jesus Christ.

In the next chapter, Paul will say more about how our freedom should be used. •

#### Questions for discussion

- Do we have different rules for children as opposed to adults? (v. 3)
- Many people have had poor relationships with their fathers. What can they do if "Dad" is not a term of respect and affection? (v. 6)
- Do I sometimes long for the ABCs of an earlier age? (v. 9)
- In Galatians, Paul was writing to Gentiles. Would he use a word like slavery if he were writing to Jews? (v. 25)

## The Greeks had a Word for it

### "Paidagōgos"

"The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ," says Galatians 3:24. The word "schoolmaster" is the King James translation of *paidagōgos*, from which we get the English word *pedagogue*, meaning "teacher."

But in ancient Greece, a *paidagōgos* was not a schoolteacher. It is difficult to translate this word because it refers to something that does not exist in our society. The Greeks had a word for it because they had "it," and we do not.

*Paidagōgos* comes from two Greek words: *pais*, meaning child, and *agōgos*, meaning leader. A *paidagōgos* was usually a slave; he made sure the children went to school and did their homework. He taught manners and good behavior, but not aca-

demic topics. He supervised the children, and disciplined misbehavior. *Paidagōgoi* had a reputation or stereotype for excessive discipline, and Greeks rarely had fond memories of the slave who supervised them.

The law was like that, Paul says. It watched over the Jewish people and gave them discipline until Christ came. He extends the analogy into chapter 4, saying that young children are like slaves—under the authority of others until a set time. And the Jews (he includes himself by using the word "we") were enslaved until Christ came (4:1-3).

But now that the true Teacher has come, "we are no longer under a schoolmaster" (3:25).