

Why More Religion isn't the Answer

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[0 : 0 0] in this bit, which he has carried on, is carrying on from what he says before, is that we are now heirs. We are no longer slaves, but we are heirs. But what I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to the guardians and trustees until the time of his father, set by his father. So also, when we are underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. So Paul is putting forward this reality that when you are known by God, you are actually an heir of something. And an heir is obviously somebody who inherits everything from the generation above, isn't it? Yeah, this isn't simply you'll get your share of the will when the person above you dies. This is something far bigger and far more profound. So in ancient Rome, when a son died, if they were a minor, sorry, if a son was a minor and too young to receive their inheritance, that's essentially what Paul is saying, they may as well have been an heir's slave. So you can have all this inheritance, but you can't actually access it. And this is what Paul is describing a reality for people who look to affirm a faith in Christ, yet at the same time look to obedience to the law as the most important thing.

It's like saying you have access to this inheritance, but you can't actually access it, because the way you look to use it makes you more or less a slave. There's something about living under this reality that while they're heirs, they may as well be slaves because they can't enjoy and embrace the benefits of being an heir. Which I think is unfortunately probably true of a lot of people who may have been historically very religious, where you put all your emphasis on obedience to be the thing that saves you. I don't know if you've ever come across religious people who might talk very stoically about joy and the joy of the Lord, but actually are kind of crushed by guilt fairly regularly, or might talk about God's love as a real thing, yet it's very fickle. It could disappear as soon as they do the wrong thing in the wrong place at the wrong time, and suddenly God's love is gone.

It's not accessible anymore. There's something about being an heir in the way where without Christ, it's like being a slave, because you have some of the promises, but you're not actually living in the reality of what it means. This is not the reality that Jesus brings. That's why in verse 4 and 5, Paul says, but when the set time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship. So this is a picture of a courthouse, in case you're wondering what that is. It's a fully binding legal reality that what is true of Jesus is true of them because of Jesus's fulfillment of living and working under the law himself. This is the crucial difference between living by the law and living under faith in Christ.

Living under the law, essentially, when you put it is the thing to save you, whatever that may mean for you, whatever you hear, you hear that word law. It is like a form of slavery, whereas Christ is marked by the freedom that comes from being a son. Now, this one, James was sharing this last week, this word son is not supposed to be some sort of gender-exclusive term. It's a legal reality.

So like in many cultures today, like there's still in certain parts of the world where the oldest son becomes heir of the family. So when the father dies, he becomes the head of the family. So similarly, in this culture, the Greek word for son here is a legal term. I don't just know about Roman history, I had to look this up. It's a legal term used in the adoption and inheritance of law in first century Rome. It is a term that refers to the status of all Christians, both men and women, who have been adopted into God's family, now enjoying all the privileges, all the obligations, and all the rights of a child who's been fully adopted into that family. So it's a full binding legal reality that you're no longer slaves but your heirs, and it is wedged in law, God's law. It's not gone, it's been fulfilled, and because of that, it says a new reality about who we are.

[4 : 20] This is the reality of faith, that Jesus lived this life, lived under the law for people who would break the law regularly so that they don't need to live by the law anymore and instead have this new bond with God. And what is this inheritance? Well, I've just, if you ever want to go and do a wee Bible study and what the inheritance of God's people are, you'll find loads of amazing things.

But our inheritance, just to list a few things, it's a future glory with Christ, including all the rewards promised us for eternity. It is an inheritance that Peter describes as imperishable, undefiled, unfading. It's an inheritance of a future where there'll be no more crying, no more pain, no more death, which obviously is this thing we're feeling very acutely, not just of COVID, but of war when we look at the past two or three years. But we all know that in our own personal lives, the craving and longing for that. But it's also an inheritance that involves joy and pleasure forever in God's presence. It's a reality, Corinthians says, in which the things that God has prepared for those who love him will eclipse your wildest imaginations. There's an aspect of the inheritance where somehow Jesus shares his authority with his children and we rule together in the new creation.

This is not simply being let off for bad things in the past so that Jesus gets you into some shaky, temporary relationship with God that as soon as you break the law, it blows up in your face.

This is a fully binding, adopted into the family with all the rights of God's firstborn son, Jesus. This is a language of being justified or righteous. The Bible has many different words to express this reality that because of Christ, God has declared someone to be in right relationship, full relationship with him again. They're forgiven, given a secure place in the family and are being transformed by God's grace. But Paul goes further than just saying there's this new legal reality as sons.

He goes on and says in verses 5 and 6, to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship. And in 6, because you are his sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, the spirit who calls out Abba, Father. So you are no longer a slave but God's child, and since you're his child, God has made you also an heir. So while he's saying something about our future inheritance being secure, he's also talking about being relationally adopted at the same time.

[7 : 05] So you're legally adopted as heirs into the family of God, but at the same time are relationally adopted. And part of the first inheritance is this idea of being given the spirit. It's part of the lived reality of being heirs today. So this is not just a legal transaction, but a deep relational one.

Because Christians are no sons. We are of age. You're no longer heirs who have got like underage, which he was describing at the beginning of this section. And the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, which for the Jewish people was generally always somewhere else, is now at home in the hearts, minds, and bodies of every believer. It fundamentally widens the intimacy of how we relate to God.

It allows us to call God Abba. So when we did our Lord's Prayer, it's the same word Jesus uses in that prayer. It's a deep, personal, intimate term for who God is, which deeply religious and pious people would have never dared use of God in case it was seen to be too personal or too intimate.

There's something about this reality. Whilst it changes our standing before God, it changes how we relate as well. And God has made his home in us and allows us to engage and speak with him in a whole new way. Like adoption is a really powerful thing, isn't it? I don't know how many of you have been caught up in watching all these wee feel-good internet videos that is now a huge business apparently. Cynically, that now makes lots of money where you look at, apparently to relieve your stress, you should watch pets and things every now and then being given as gifts.

But have you seen the ones, there's quite a number of them where it's a stepchild or a step-parent exchanging documents, usually on a birthday or something, they open up and the kid or the parent realizes they've been legally adopted. Maybe I've just watched these things. But there's a lot of them. Now, you're not moved in those moments because you're like, wow, what a beautiful legal document, aren't you? You're moved generally because there's a power of commitment and relationship there that has changed. Even though the child is probably in the house and knew the step-parent, there's something that's happening in that moment where this binding legal reality is also a reflective of reality of the heart and the posture of a parent to a child. Like for me, my mum was adopted because my gran couldn't have children. And I remember when we all found out by accident and there was kind of this panic in the family that it would kind of delegitimize somehow our relationship with our grandmother. That was a fear that was happening. But actually, for me, it did the opposite. Because of some of the troubles we'd experienced in our family, there was something about actually, our gran that is not blood-bound to be here. She chooses to be here. She has bonded herself with her children and her children's children.

[9 : 50] That actually makes it somehow, for me anyway, in the moment, more powerful and more meaningful. So while at the heart of the gospel is a reality in which our position for God changes from one of alienated, unknown, slave to an heir, it is far more than simply a transactional change.

It is one of a father and children. And again, as James said, we all have different experiences of what that means. And I know for me, I've had a fractured relationship with my dad over the years, and relearning what God the Father is like, especially in relation to behavior and the law. I don't know if you've ever been in a room where you're watching a new child try to learn to walk. Like, what do a group of adults do when a little child is trying to learn to walk? It goes, one, two, three, fall.

Generally, well, it depends what kind of adult you are, I guess. You generally cheer and encourage that little kid to get back up and walk again, don't you? You don't shout at the little child and be like, idiot, you should have done that better. Come on, try again. And until you get it right, I'll have nothing to do with you, do you? That's not, well, if you experienced that, I'm sorry that was your experience. But generally, that's not the way adults usually act when they're watching a child trying to learn how to walk. Jesus has reorientated our posture of our relationship with God within the law. So when we try to walk, we try to live in the way he has called us to live. We do it with a Father who is for us and is encouraging us to continue to walk in the ways he has called us to walk. I recently, this weekend, went to see the new Batman film. I don't know if any of you have seen it, but man, that's a film full of people with daddy issues. That's what the whole film is essentially about. But one of the things about that film is, which is the oldest story within Batman, is where Hebrews will become apparent in a second. It's not, Ali was asking me, is it in Batman Hebrews?

It's not. But Batman is an heir. He has inherited all the money, all the wealth, and the weight of the Wayne legacy. He's got it all. He's a fundamentally broken character. Actually, every character in that film is a fundamentally broken character because of a relationship that is missing with a father.

And so they try their different ways to make up for that. They try their own forms of religion, so to speak. It's quite quirky ways they try. And also, Batman, two people have already pointed out, Batman will give you a bad rep if you wear these kind of glasses because this is what the psychopathic Riddler wears. But he tries to work and earn the relationship of a father. There's an absent voice there. That is not the reality for Christians. Instead, the Scriptures say things like this, in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, from whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation, which is Jesus, perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy, Christ, and those who are being made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. So our relationship with Jesus is about the past, present, and future. In history, he sacrificially gives himself under the conditions of the law so that we may have forgiveness. Yet in his resurrection, he raises us all to new life, changing us in the present through the gift of his Spirit, the first part of our inheritance.

[13 : 03] And in his glory and victory to come, brings about the fulfillment of the kingdom of God and our place in that. So why, given these amazing realities, would someone want to return to the law?

Well, to know that, we have to think about this, which is where we'll end, this idea of elementary principles, which is what Paul talks about in verses 3 and 9. Formerly, you did not know God, you were slaves, but by whose nature you are not, to those who by nature are not God, but know that you do know God, or rather God is known by, I'll try that again, or rather are known by God, how is it that you're turning back to those weak and miserable forces, or elementary forces, other translations say? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? Now, elementary forces is a biblical term to talk of, like, spiritual realities that were affirmed in nature by, so paganism is a good example. So you're a farmer, and you needed rain, you were trying to appease the rain gods to make rain come, and you believed there was a spiritual reality behind that where you could influence it based on your deeds. And that might sound a bit backward and a bit old, but actually, I think where that kind of mindset is all well and alive today. I've got a mate who used to be an investment banker, and the way he talks about the stock markets may as well be a pagan god.

You know, we need to keep the markets happy, and here's the costs we need to do to keep the markets happy, and if the markets are happy, we'll be blessed, but actually, we need to make costs and sacrifice things otherwise. But economically, it's not just there. Like, you think social dynamics, we can live like that. If you do the right things and look the right way or have the right types of kind of relationship, you will be blessed, you will be accepted. That kind of through-line of elementary principles, which is not just sociological. Paul says it's spiritual as well.

It's everywhere. And Paul is worried that they are going to go back and forfeit their entire relationship with God. That's why he says, like, it's like you'd never heard anything I'd said. Yeah, he throws this sentence in about days and weeks and seasons, in verse 10. You're observing special days and months and seasons and years, which feels a bit random, but what Paul's actually making reference to there is all the Jewish festivals. So if you were the original readers, like, Paul's like, look, you used to be pagans in your way of thinking. Now you know God. Don't throw that all away to go back. But actually, one of the ways you might go back to paganism is lifting up the laws of God and making them the things that you think save you. If you were one of the pious religious Jewish leaders, this is kind of one of the clashes Jesus had often with the religious leaders, is these things you've put in place, you've made them your God, and therefore you've missed God. And he kind of lumps them in with this way of being. Because empty religion is also an exhausting and anxious way of living. So part of the way of living under elementary principles is it's really tiring, and you're never really firm in any foundation anywhere. And Paul is essentially saying there's a way of being hyper-religious that is just as pagan as anything else.

It does not sit well alongside when Jesus says things like, come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. He's put all the emphasis on you and what you can do. You're the one that needs to keep going. You're the one that needs to keep working. And not only is it wrong, it completely undermines the work of Christ as somehow it was secondary. And Paul doesn't really have a lot of time for that, to say the least. And that is why I've written on the sheets, the gospel is not a form of Stockholm Syndrome. So Stockholm Syndrome, I don't know if you're aware of what that is. It's that psychological phenomenon that when somebody's taken captive by something, they eventually start to believe that's their real reality. Sometimes that's emotional, so people fall in love with their captors. But sometimes it's more than that, is that people form a bond with the thing that's originally enslaved them, and they start to believe, even though it's irrational, that even in the light of truth, that freedom is somehow a threat. So slavery, whether it be economic, religious, or social, is always irrational and has a spiritual reality behind it.

[17:17] And when we live in it, we form a bond with those systems as we think we know how they work. And that's actually one of the tragedies of living this way, is that ultimately it becomes about our work, and we have a feeling of safety and control about that. It feels safe, so it's predictable, so we want a bit of predictableness in our lives. We end up thinking we can do the work to get what we want, and we end up believing that slavery keeps us safe through our work and through the systems we build. Paul gives no ground anywhere that would lead someone to believe that their right standing before God, their forgiveness, their identity as heirs and children of God, has anything to do with these elementary principles, these systems, and has everything to do with the work that Jesus has done in his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus obeyed the law perfectly in a way that none of us ever could even remotely hope to, completely fulfilling the requirements, that's what he says in verse 4, and earning its blessings, but then chooses to take the consequences of any human ever breaking that on himself, so that we inherit who Jesus is for ourselves. His life becomes our life, his death, and the forgiveness of sins becomes ours. What he becomes in the resurrection becomes ours, and the temptation to go back to something that makes us think, yeah, but I don't fully trust that, so give me something where I know I put in something and I get something out. Even if those things end up enslaving us and crushing us, it somehow becomes a strangely alluring and tempting thing, and Paul is saying quite strongly, this isn't just a bad idea. This isn't just like a quirk that you get wrong every other night. It undermines everything that Jesus stood for. It's like saying, I do believe in the forgiveness of sins and everything it offers to me, but actually it doesn't really work and apply in me because of, well, whatever you may fill out that sentence with, that somehow you're the one person in all of creation that the cross does not apply to. Apart from being a ridiculous statement, but I do have blamed things like that about myself in the past, and Paul's like, just stop putting your work into these places. It's a form of slavery, whether it's religious or any other form of way of living this type of life. It's Paul's conviction that the Bible's insistence that no one can be transformed by purely observing the law, only faith in the work of Christ. So instead, we have this new relationship as heirs and sons, which is more loving, more binding, and more transforming than anything that any law could give. It redeems our past, restores our present, and reorientates and secures our future.

So I'm going to pray, and then the band will come up. Father, I thank you for the truth of who you tell us we are. I pray, Lord, wherever we have picked up something different of what the gospel says, you'd be quick to correct it in our hearts and minds to help us to live new lives for you and for one another in true freedom, not a form of slavery.

I ask that in your son's name. Amen.