

Study 8
Galatians 4:1-7

1. What does the metaphor of a child being under guardianship tell us about the role of the Law prior to the gospel? In what subtle way does the metaphor of the child under a guardian give us additional comfort and assurance of our status?

The metaphor of a child under guardianship illustrates that the Law was a temporary guide, meant to protect and discipline God's people until they matured into full heirs through faith in Christ. This metaphor also provides comfort and assurance, as it implies that believers were already heirs and recipients of God's grace and adoption but there was a period of time when they were being prepared to fully experience the full benefits of their status. The Law was never meant to be a permanent restriction but a preparatory stage leading to the full rights and freedom of sonship in Christ.

2. In what way is adoption in ancient Roman times different from adoption today? What is Paul trying to convey to us when he writes that we as believers are sons and heirs?

In ancient Roman times, adoption was primarily about inheritance and status, often involving adults rather than children, and once adopted, the individual gained full legal rights while severing all ties with their old family. Paul uses this concept to emphasize that believers are fully integrated into God's family, with complete rights as heirs to His promises, demonstrating the permanence, security, and privilege of our new identity in Christ.

3. a) Our pre-Christian existence is cast as "slavery to elemental principles". What did Paul mean by this?

Paul describes pre-Christian existence as "slavery to elemental principles" (Galatians 4:3), referring to both the Jewish reliance on the Mosaic Law and the Gentile bondage to idolatry and worldly forces, which include spiritual, cultural, and philosophical systems that falsely promise salvation but ultimately enslave. These principles, whether legalistic righteousness or pagan superstition, kept people in spiritual captivity until Christ set them free.

- b) In our current times do you see how this is actually a struggle for us?

Today, people still struggle with modern forms of these "elemental principles," such as legalism, materialism, identity politics, and self-salvation through personal achievement or societal approval. Many unknowingly place their hope in ideologies, social norms, or success-driven lifestyles that demand their allegiance, mirroring the same kind of spiritual enslavement Paul warned against.

4. a) How is the concept of sonship in the bible different from our ideas of sonship in today's society? What is the main emphasis in Paul using this imagery of sonship in our standing before God? (Look at 1 John 3:10 for clues).

In today's society, sonship is often understood in terms of biological relation, emotional bonds, or legal adoption, whereas in biblical times, sonship was primarily about inheritance, vocation, and identity. In Paul's time sons almost always followed in their fathers footsteps. A son of a farmer was always a farmer. A son of a carpenter would always become a carpenter but in today's society this idea is almost alien as sons rarely followed in their father's footsteps in terms of profession.

Nehemiah 12:28 (ESV) 28 And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; The term sons of singers does not mean that they are direct descendants of singers but that they are vocationally singers

When Jesus was identified as the "son of David, the son of Abraham," in Matt 1, it also meant that to be a "son" means to follow in someone's footsteps; to emulate another's actions; to carry on and, to an extent, fulfill the "father's" life and purpose.

Paul's emphasis in using this imagery (Galatians 4:7) is to show that believers are fully adopted into God's family are expected to reflect their heavenly Father in behaviour and character and aspirations. All too often we tend to focus on our privileges as rightful heirs with all the privileges of Christ and much less often are we inspired to reflecting the Father's righteousness and love (1 John 3:10).

"We who are believers are "sons of Abraham," because we fulfill God's promise to Abraham that He would bless the world through Abraham's descendants ([Genesis 12:3](#)). Jesus is the "Son of David" because He is the fulfillment of God's promise that David would always have a descendant on the throne ([2 Samuel 7:10-13](#)). In these cases, Abraham and David become more than people or patriarchs; they become the embodiment of an idea—specifically, God's work in humanity. To be a son is to partake in the grand purpose of another's life ([Matthew 13:38](#); [Luke 6:35](#))."(from <https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-sons.html>)

- b) How has the modern church often misunderstood sonship with the focus on believers' authority, word of faith, and an over-emphasized focus on spiritual gifts?

The modern church has sometimes misunderstood sonship by overemphasizing authority, prosperity, and spiritual gifts, reducing it to a tool for personal power rather than a call to reflect God's character. This

imbalance shifts the focus from holiness, love, and obedience to self-centered claims of dominion, leading some to pursue blessings over the transformative relationship with the Father that true sonship entails.

5. a) What is the difference between a son and a slave? How does this difference influence the way we perceive ourselves and more importantly the way we live? How is the dangerous concept of legalism further explained by the imagery of slavery as opposed to sonship?

A **son** belongs to the family permanently, enjoys an intimate relationship with the father, and inherits all that the father owns, whereas a **slave** is under obligation, lacks intimacy, and has no lasting claim to the family's blessings (Galatians 4:7). When we see ourselves as **sons**, we live in freedom, love, and assurance rather than fear, striving, or insecurity, shaping our faith as a relationship rather than mere rule-following. **Legalism**, like slavery, traps people in an endless cycle of performance-based righteousness, where obedience is driven by fear of punishment rather than love for the Father, making true intimacy with God impossible.

- b) Reflection Question. Please share experiences where we are tempted to act as slaves rather than sons.

Case Study

1. Jenny Loo had come from a religious background being a Buddhist all her life before coming to faith in Christ in her teens. She came to Christ at a rally in her Christian fellowship in school when she was convicted of her eternal damnation because of her sin. She diligently did her quiet time every single day, attended church and her bible study group, and even regularly helped out at a local soup kitchen. She was picked to be a youth leader in her church and ran the fellowship very well as she had great administrative and social skills. She met and fell in love with her college mate who unfortunately was not a believer soon her usual spiritual routine fell apart and she neglected her quiet time, quit her leadership position and even her church attendance was rare. She found great joy in her newfound boyfriend who introduced her to a whole new world outside religion. Deep inside she struggled with guilt as her old fears of eternal damnation resurfaced. She could not confess her sin because she was not ready to repent. She redoubled her efforts at the soup kitchen, forced herself to read the bible more, and even tried to evangelize her boyfriend. Her friends at church reached out to her to try to restore her but she rejected them and in the end, married her boyfriend when they were 20 years of age. Years later, the same church friends convinced her to go to Alpha and she went to hear the gospel and went back to church.
 - a. What do you think is the fundamental problem here? Is Jenny acting as a son of God or a slave? What is the evidence?

- b. What is the source of Jenny's guilt? What is the basis of her spiritual standing? Is it in Christ or her performance?

- c. If you were Jenny's friend how would you counsel her?

- d. Some of Jenny's friends in church nominated her for a church leadership position again after some months but the leaders noted her history and non-Christian spouse and insisted that this would only be possible if her husband became a Christian. What do you think about the merits or biblical basis of such a condition?

Takeaway

Paul teaches in Galatians 4:1-7 that believers, both Jews and Gentiles, are no longer under the guardianship of the Law but are fully adopted as God's children through Christ, with the privilege of calling Him "Abba, Father." This adoption breaks all barriers of ethnicity, gender, and status, giving believers a new identity, inheritance, and mission to share the gospel with others.