

## Freedom as an Heir

Devotional Reading: [Genesis 12:1–9](#)

Background Scripture: [Galatians 3:19–4:7](#)

[Galatians 3:23–4:7](#)

<sup>23</sup> Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

<sup>26</sup> So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

<sup>4:1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. <sup>3</sup> So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. <sup>4</sup> But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. <sup>6</sup> Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.



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## Key Text

*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,—Galatians 3:26*

God's Law Is Love

## Unit 2: Faith Triumphs, Law Fails

Lessons 5–9

### Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Restate the task of the law.
2. Compare and contrast conditions under the law with conditions in Christ Jesus.
3. State one way to express the reality of [Galatians 4:7](#) to an unbeliever.

### Lesson Outline

#### Introduction

A. From a Slave ...

## B. Lesson Context

### I. Abraham's Seed (Galatians 3:23–29)

#### A. Before Faith (vv. 23–24)

*Destination in View*

#### B. Faith in Christ (vv. 25–29)

### I. God's Children (Galatians 4:1–7)

#### A. Underage Heirs (vv. 1–3)

#### B. Grown Heirs (vv. 4–7)

*A Selfless Act*

## Conclusion

### A.... To a Son

### B. Prayer

### C. Thought to Remember

## How to Say It

Abba *Ab-buh.*

Galatia *Guh-lay-shuh.*

Gentiles *Jen-tiles.*

Judaizers *Joo-duh-ize-ers.*

Mosaic *Mo-zay-ik.*

## Introduction

### A. From a Slave ...

Until I was in high school, I believed that God relished the prospect of disciplining me and sending me to hell for my sins. Because of this wrong view of God, I tried to manage my works with a list of dos and don'ts. I wasn't practicing a healthy rejection of evil, led by the Spirit; I was a slave to my own attempts to earn my salvation. This was my only relationship with God.

Paul's words in today's lesson had something to say to my young heart, and they yet speak to all of us as he puts the law in its proper context.

### B. Lesson Context

In today's printed text, Paul continued his efforts to instruct the Galatian Christians about the correct relationship between law and grace. Because of some false teachers called Judaizers, the churches in the province of Galatia were adding works of the law to the gospel of Christ ([Galatians 1:6–10](#)). Paul reflected on his own "extremely zealous" experience in Judaism ([1:14](#)) as he highlighted his inability to follow the law to the point of justification ([2:15–21](#); see [lesson 7](#)). Through Christ, the

promise of salvation had been revealed to the whole world (3:6–9; see [lesson 8](#)). Paul went on to show the unifying nature of that salvation for all who would believe in Christ.

Because of Paul's preaching of the gospel of grace, some of his opponents accused him of acting in contradiction to the Old Testament (example: [Acts 18:12–13](#)). While Paul presented the new message of grace without apology, he also readily acknowledged that there was a purpose for the old Law of Moses. He strenuously maintained that the new is superior, but that the old had a vital purpose in God's plan.

[Galatians 3:15–22](#) (immediately preceding our printed text) focuses on the illustration of Abraham's (singular) seed. It is in Christ alone that God fulfilled the law. And this fulfillment did not do away with the promises God made; far from it! Instead, Jesus was the means by which God made good on the promises to Abraham and his descendants. In [3:21–22](#), Paul focused on the limitation of the law, namely that it could not impart righteousness or life.

## I. Abraham's Seed ([Galatians 3:23–29](#))

### A. Before Faith (vv. 23–24)

**23. Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.**

The Greek word translated *held in custody* is best understood here as guarding or shielding (compare [Philippians 4:7](#); [1 Peter 1:5](#)). Though it could refer to being held in custody against one's will (compare [2 Corinthians 11:22](#)), Paul uses a different word entirely to discuss his imprisonments ([6:5](#); compare [Hebrews 11:36](#); [1 Peter 3:19](#)). This might imply that the law served as a restraint, showing the extent of sin through Scripture (see [Galatians 3:22](#), not in our printed text). We are so constrained because we are in fact guilty of sin. Every human being has been confined to a place on death row ([Romans 5:12](#)).

*This faith* and *the faith* refer to a body of doctrine to be believed (see [Ephesians 4:13](#); [Philippians 1:27](#); [1 Timothy 6:21](#); [Titus 1:13](#); [Jude 3](#)). More than a personal response, this is the set of truths that constitute the gospel. Believers were kept safe *under the law*, waiting for the gospel to *be revealed*.

**24. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.**

A *guardian* was a man put in charge of a young boy by his parents. The man's role can be described as that of a tutor and mentor, like a coach looking to form the young boy from about age 6 into a wise, knowledgeable young man of about 16. This guardian oversaw the boy's development primarily outside of the classroom, ensuring that tasks related to both schooling and household chores were accomplished properly. This position was frequently filled by a trusted slave.

This illustrates how *the law* played a key role in the development of God's people, and it was a time-limited role. No one could be *justified* under the Law of Moses ([Acts 13:39](#)). The law's purpose was never to save anyone; it was to show the need for the one who can save everyone. Because the law could do only so much, God sent his Son to fulfill the requirements of the law (see [Romans 8:1–4](#)). The work of *Christ* was the culmination of God's plan for our salvation; placing our faith in him is the suc-

cess of the guardian. Now that Christ has come, we do not look to the law as a way to be in right standing before God; rather, we look to Christ as “the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness” (10:4).

### Destination in View

In 1856, William Rand opened a printing shop in Chicago. Two years later, he hired an Irish immigrant named Andrew McNally, who later became his business partner. The first Rand McNally® railroad guide was published in 1869, followed by a highway map in 1904.

I remember Rand McNally maps from road trips with my grandparents. Every year they would take me, my brother, and our cousins on our annual trip. My grandma sat in the front passenger seat with the Rand McNally book occupying all the space between her and the dash. As Grandpa drove, she prepared him for every lane change and exit necessary to get us to our Tennessee mountain destination.

The Rand McNally map that guided our route on family vacations has now been superseded by the GPS features in our cars. Either might be likened to how the law was intended to guide people to the Messiah. Now that we have reached our destination in Jesus, what role does that “map” play in your faith? What role should it play?

—J. M.

### B. Faith in Christ (vv. 25–29)

#### 25. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

Paul’s Galatian audience held that justification was a “both/and” construct. Their understanding of justification required both following the law and expressing faith in Christ. To correct that error, Paul highlighted the superiority and finality of *faith* in bringing justification. Now that Christ has come, the *guardian*—the law—is *no longer* required. It is “out of work” once we come to Christ and discover the freedom that he alone can provide. At that point, we have “matured” to where we are part of God’s family.

#### What Do You Think?

What rules from your childhood have you discarded as an adult?

#### Digging Deeper

What did you learn from those rules?

What lasting value have those lessons had in your life?

#### 26. So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,

The false teachers in Galatia would have strenuously opposed Paul’s statement here. It was one thing to say that Gentiles did not need to follow the law, the Judaizers’ first point of contention. But to say Jews also need not obey the law would be heretical to the teachers.

Jews believed that *children of God* was a designation that belonged to them alone as they were

God's chosen people who followed the law (example: [Deuteronomy 14:1–2](#)). And to be fair, the term never had applied to Gentiles before. But God's promises were always intended to come through Israel to the world, not stop with this one group of people ([Galatians 3:8](#)). *Through faith in Christ Jesus all can equally be called children of God* ([John 1:12](#); [Romans 8:14–16](#)).

Paul had much more to say about faith as it relates to salvation. But right now, the summary statement we see here is sufficient for the line of argument he is establishing.

**27. for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.**

Baptism is the ritual of being dipped in water, first practiced by John the Baptist. In the Jewish culture of the day, people purified themselves ceremonially by dipping themselves in water. John's actions, however, were different in procedure and significance. Regarding procedure, the person receiving baptism did not dip herself or himself. Rather, another performed the dipping action on the recipient. Regarding significance, John's baptism was one "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" ([Mark 1:4](#)). By contrast, Christian baptism was administered in the name of Jesus for receiving the Holy Spirit ([Acts 19:1–6](#)). We see these elements in Peter's exhortation on the Day of Pentecost that followed Jesus' resurrection: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" ([2:38](#); compare [Matthew 28:19](#)).

Circumcision had previously been the physical marker of whether a man was included in Israel's covenant relationship with God. Baptism levelled the playing field not only between Jewish and Gentile men, but women as well (see commentary on [Galatians 3:28](#), below). It is the common experience of all believers (compare [Acts 2:38](#); [Romans 6:3–4](#)). Baptism thus is a powerful expression of the equality and unity of Christ's followers. None are able to cleanse themselves, even those who had grown up following God's law. All rely utterly on Christ's cleansing. None can look to previous Israelite identity as credentials for inheriting eternal life. Rather, all must look to Christ's death and resurrection.

Jesus' "robe of his righteousness" ([Isaiah 61:10](#)) has replaced our "filthy rags" ([64:6](#)). As we grow in the Christian life, we should become more and more like *Christ* and more comfortable wearing his wardrobe (compare [Romans 13:14](#)). Christians are not defined by ancestral heritage or former practices but by Christ's gracious forgiveness and gift of new life. Though we may look and act differently from one another, we all wear the same spiritual clothing. It is the uniform of the gospel that speaks of Christ alone (compare [Isaiah 61:10](#)).

In Christ, barriers are broken down. Together we are a new creation, transformed through the work of the Holy Spirit ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#); [Colossians 3:10–11](#)). Lines of division regarding access to salvation are dissolved in Christ, and Paul used three important examples to emphasize this.

**What Do You Think?**

What helps you remember every day that you are clothed in Christ?

**Digging Deeper**

What is one article of spiritual clothing you still wear that doesn't "go" with the outfit of Christ?

**28a. There is neither Jew nor Gentile,**

First, Paul addressed concerns of ethnic and cultural divisions as centered on the Law of Moses. Of main concern for a *Jew* was adherence to the law, notably the law's prescriptions for circumcision and the Judaizers' intent to bind Gentiles (Greeks) to it (see [Acts 15:1](#)). But in the Christian era, physical circumcision as a covenant sign is no longer applicable for God's people ([Romans 3:30](#); [1 Corinthians 7:18–19](#); [Galatians 5:6](#); [6:15](#)).

**28b. neither slave nor free,**

Second, the structure of the Roman Empire required an economy of slavery. In the structure of God's economy of salvation, though, the servant in bondage and the *free* person have equal access; both can find eternal life in Christ Jesus. Under Christ, a bondservant was to be counted as "a dear brother" ([Philemon 16](#)).

**28c. nor is there male and female,**

Paul's third statement is not meant to disregard obvious gender differences or address varied beliefs on the roles of men and women. Rather, Paul addressed the issue of equal access to salvation, given the context of the passage at hand (see more on [Galatians 3:29](#), below). In many cultures, the vulnerability of women becomes a basis for men to take positions of privilege. Such inequality of access includes the customs of inheritance: women typically did not inherit property in the Greco-Roman world of the first century AD. The fact that there is no *male and female* means that everyone has the same opportunity of an eternal inheritance ([Acts 20:32](#)).

**28d. for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

Divisions that result from living in a fallen world, including those that vex us yet today, are overcome by the gospel. Oneness *in Christ Jesus* means we treat each other with absolute love and respect as equal heirs of salvation. Our differences have no bearing on one's access to or standing in Christ. We serve as one body ([Romans 12:4–8](#); [1 Corinthians 12:12–27](#)).

**What Do You Think?**

Over the years, how has the Holy Spirit changed your heart regarding divisions that exist between people within the body of Christ?

**Digging Deeper**

Does that change of heart extend beyond the church? Why or why not?

**29. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.**

The word *you* addresses all the baptized believers who are united in Christ. *Abraham's seed* previously referred only to his physical, Jewish descendants (compare [Matthew 3:9](#); [Luke 3:8](#)). But union with Christ has made all believers *heirs according to God's promise* ([Genesis 12:2–3](#); [Romans 4; 8:16–17](#)). Being in Christ implies having full access to the promise of his blessing.

**What Do You Think?**

If you met Abraham today, how would you describe your experience of the blessings that God promised would come to Abraham's seed?

**Digging Deeper**

How do you extend the invitation to experience God's blessings to people who are not currently Abraham's heirs?

## II. God's Children (Galatians 4:1–7)

### A. Underage Heirs (vv. 1–3)

**1–2. 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 guardians and trustees until the time set by his father.**

These verses take up the analogy from Galatians 3:24–25, above, to further illustrate the nature of God's plan. Paul did so by picturing an underage child who will eventually inherit the father's property. The underage person is treated as *a slave* although at the same time *he owns the whole estate*, having already been designated as the heir who will control the property. In Roman custom, an heir lacked control over family property until he reached the age of majority, around 25. The *guardians and trustees* exercised authority until then (compare Galatians 3:24, above).

**3. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world.**

Paul now made the comparison: like those who are underage, the Galatian Christians had lived not as heirs, but *in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world* (compare Galatians 4:9 and Colossians 2:8, 20). Some students think that the word *forces* refers to the supernatural powers or elements regarded as having control over the events of this world, considering Paul's uses of this word in passages just noted.

Others think that the concept of elements in this particular context means “something that is basic or elementary,” such as learning one's ABCs. In the specific context of Judaizers in Galatia, these elementary things would refer to the teachings of the Law of Moses. The past tense *were* implies that this bondage should be over (see commentary on Galatians 4:4, below).

### B. Grown Heirs (vv. 4–7)

**4. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,**

The word *but* introduces a contrast as *the set time had fully come*—the time for Old Testament prophecies to be fulfilled (see Genesis 12:3; 2 Samuel 7:16; Isaiah 9:6–7; Mark 1:15; Ephesians 1:10). The contrast is with the era of childhood, described above. Because the Galatian believers were living when God had fulfilled his purposes with the Law of Moses, its regulations were of the past. There was no reason for Christians—whether of Jewish or Gentile background—to listen to those who insisted on submission to its distinctives in order to receive salvation in Christ (compare Mark 7:19; Colossians 2:16–23; etc.).

The *Son* is divine, eternal, and had been *sent* with purpose (John 1:1, 14; 3:16–19; 1 Corinthians 8:6;



[Galatians 1:16](#); [Philippians 2:6–8](#); [Colossians 1:15–18](#)). *Born under the law* affirms that Jesus was subject to the Mosaic law (example: [Luke 2:22–24](#)).

**5. to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.**

*To redeem* means “to buy back” (see [Leviticus 25:25–55](#)). In that regard, Jesus’ ministry was twofold. First, he rescued us from the tyranny of *the law*, under which we stood condemned because of our sin. But he did not do that merely to send us out on our own; he has also adopted us into his family. We were once outside of the special relationship with God and its blessings, but now we stand to inherit the promises and their blessings as his children ([Romans 8:15, 23](#)). The use of the word *sonship* does not exclude women from the family of God since male and female are one in Christ ([Galatians 3:28](#); also [4:6–7](#), below).

**What Do You Think?**

What practical difference has being adopted into God’s family made in your life?

**Digging Deeper**

How does your adoption into God’s family affect how you interact with your earthly family?

### A Selfless Act

My midwestern family learned that native Alaskan culture emphasizes respecting one’s elders and living off the land. Both of these cultural values are demonstrated when a boy enters manhood. The boy would have learned to hunt and fish at a young age. So when the father decides his son is old enough, Dad takes him out to shoot his first moose. The son, now grown, gives all the meat away to an elder in his village or town. In this way, the son demonstrates his maturity through a selfless and generous act. The underlying principle is that “boys think of themselves, and men think of others.”

Through his Son, God the Father gave us something far superior to a freezer full of moose meat. In the greatest of all selfless acts, Jesus came to redeem us by paying the sin price on our behalf. What selfless acts does our Father desire of us as we enter adulthood in his family?

—J. M.

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

The same language of sending *his Son* in [Galatians 4:4](#) (above) is used of sending *the Spirit*. To Paul and other biblical writers, the heart is where our will resides, as well as our emotions ([Mark 7:20–23](#); etc.). The work of the Spirit of *his Son* in *our hearts* is to transform us into Christ’s image by reshaping our very desires ([Romans 8:9–10](#)).

The efficacy of our adoption is seen in the intimate language of calling out to the *Father*. *Abba* is the warm, familial word used in the household for a father. It is a term of endearment and closeness (compare [Mark 14:36](#)). As children of God, we can go to God with such endearing language.

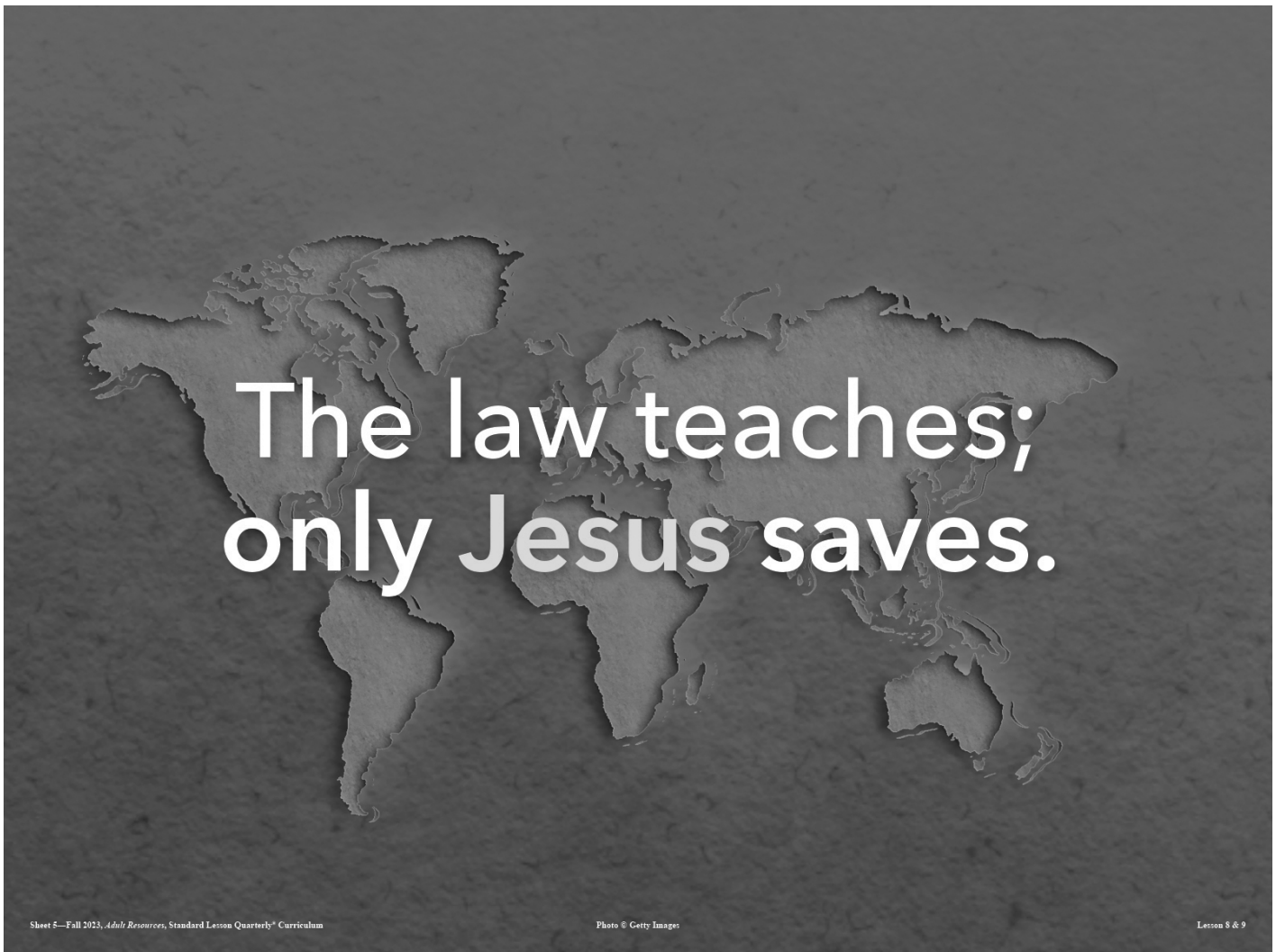
**7. So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.**

Paul summarized everything he has said so far, and he applied it to each individual who is in Christ. Anyone who is redeemed in Christ and has his Spirit is redeemed from a state like that of a *slave* to that of, not only a *child*, but *an heir* to the Father’s glorious inheritance. We are recipients of God’s promises now and through eternity.

## Conclusion

### A... To a Son

In my freshman year of high school, I went to a camp that described Jesus in a new way. This teaching depicted God—my Father—as one who loved me very much. This God would forgive me and never abandon me. This teaching was good news! When I surrendered to Jesus, I realized I had been a slave to a works-based salvation, a slave to sin, a slave to fear, and a slave to “trying hard, but never sure.”



Visual for [Lessons 8 & 9](#). As class concludes, ask learners to give specific examples from the lessons in Galatians that back up this summary.

But the situation is not hopeless. A pardon has been provided through the death of Jesus. In Christ, I am free from this anguish. And you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, enjoy the same status I do. We are loved; we are our Father's children. Our new status is a result of this relationship. The Spirit lives in our hearts to confirm this. God had a plan from the beginning, and regardless of who you once were, in Christ you are made right with God. You have been bought with a price and adopted as his child. We are not to be slaves to law, traditions, cultural norms, or other restrictions; we are free through faith in Jesus Christ to live fully as the heirs of God's promise.

### B. Prayer

Father, forgive us for the times where we act as if you are not enough. Thank you for the new identity that you give us by loving us and making us your children. Help us to live in the promise that you give us through faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Whoever we are, wherever we come from, we can be children of God through Christ.

## Involvement Learning

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

### Into the Lesson

Write three questions on the board: 1—*What expectations do people in authority have of you?* 2—*What restrictions do you have?* 3—*What freedoms or advantages can you enjoy in your position?* Then divide learners into three groups: **Young Children in School**, **Adult Members of a Political Dynasty**, and **Employees of a Powerful CEO**. Give the groups a few minutes to discuss and answer these questions based on their assigned demographic. Then invite them to share their responses with the whole group.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “What Is Freedom? Part 1” exercise from the activity pages, which you can download. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing answers with a partner.

After either activity say, “We experience freedom in different ways, depending on who has authority and our relationship to them. In today's lesson, notice who has true freedom and how that freedom is defined.”

### Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Galatians 3:23–29](#) while the learners follow along. Write on the board *Before Faith* and *Faith Has Come* as the headers of two columns. Divide the class in half, designating one half as the **Before Faith Group** and the other half as the **Faith Has Come Group**. Record answers as the activity progresses. Invite the **Before Faith Group** to recall one thing Paul mentioned about life before faith (without looking at the text). If that answer is correct, ask the **Faith Has Come Group** to recall one thing in the text about life after faith came. Continue to alternate back and forth between the groups. If a group cannot think of something to say, or gives an incorrect response, the other group gets a chance to answer. If neither group can answer, give both groups a chance to look over the text again. The first group to respond correctly gets the credit. (Answers may include: **Before Faith**—held in custody under the law, locked up, law was our guardian, before Christ came, divided; **Faith Has Come**—no longer under the law, children of God, baptized in Christ, clothed with Christ, all one in Christ.) When neither team can think of any more answers, count their responses; whichever team has more answers wins.

*Alternative.* Distribute the “What Is Freedom? Part 2” exercise from the activity page. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

Have a volunteer read aloud [Galatians 4:1–7](#). Have learners go back to the three groups from earlier in the lesson. Assign verses to the three groups: **Underage Heir Group**, verses 1–3; **Adopted Son Group**, verses 4–5; **Abba’s Children Group**, verses 6–7. Instruct the groups to research what Paul is talking about in their assigned verses. Use the commentary to help clarify the research. Then have the groups report back and share any new insights they may have gained.

## Into Life

Ask a volunteer to reread aloud [Galatians 3:28–29](#). Ask the group how these distinctions still hold up today or how they might update the groups to better reflect their own context. Then discuss how the unity found in Christ is demonstrated in your congregation. Brainstorm one or two opportunities in your congregation to better demonstrate believers’ unity because of shared faith in Christ. Discuss how visible unity as children of God furthers the spread of the gospel. Then state one way to express the reality of [Galatians 4:7](#) to an unbeliever, keeping in mind the change in identity found in Christ.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “What Is Freedom? Part 2” exercise from the activity page. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

Close in prayer, asking for opportunities to witness to unity in Christ and his gospel.