



**GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING  
Heirs According to Promise**

**GALATIANS 3:23-29**

May 8, 2011

Dr. Todd Wilson, *Senior Pastor*

<sup>23</sup>Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup>So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, <sup>26</sup>for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. <sup>27</sup>For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

## **Introduction**

On Friday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the world paused to watch the Royal wedding of Ms. Kate Middleton to Prince William; to be more precise, William Arthur Philip Louis, heir to the thrones of the sixteen Commonwealth realms.

It was a splendid sight to behold; in fact, in many ways quite moving. I found it especially charming to see the number of people Kate had invited from her village of Bucklebury in Berkshire. They wanted their wedding to be a "people's wedding," so they invited the postman, the local pub owner, a shop keeper and his wife.

But I found this to only underscore the remarkable thing that was happening. On Thursday, April 28<sup>th</sup>, she's just Kate Middleton. A day later, she's been enfolded into the Royal Family. She's taken on a new identity; no longer is she Kate Middleton of Bucklebury, but now the Duchess of Cambridge. And, to top it all, by virtue of her marriage to the future King, she has herself now become heir to the throne.

An heir is someone who has a legal right to an inheritance. And that is what you become when you come to faith in Christ Jesus. This is the wonderful highpoint of this passage: "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (3:29). Heirs according to promise; and in this case, the inheritance, for those who belong to Christ, is not the crown of the United Kingdom, but something God himself has promised, which is even better!

For what God has promised to those who through faith are in Christ Jesus is this: "the kingdom of God" (5:21), or, as Paul can say a few verses later, "eternal life" (6:8). Or, a few

verses after that, “a new creation” (6:17). In Romans, Paul simply says this promise is that believers would inherit “the world” (4:13). In the Book of Hebrews, this promise is referred to as “the city that is to come” (13:14), “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28), and “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (11:16). And the Book of Revelation brings this biblical promise to a crescendo with its vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1), “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2).

This is what God long ago promised to Abraham and to his seed: the reverse of the curse, the restoration of fallen humanity, the renewal of the whole creation. So, brother or sister in Christ Jesus, and therefore heirs according to the promise, if you came in this morning either sad or sleepy, wake up and rejoice!

But how do you become an heir according to promise? This passage says you must become Christ's. You must belong to him. You possess these “precious and very great promises” (2 Pet. 1:4) by being possessed by Christ. Christ must own you as his own. He must become yours, and you become his. It's like a Royal wedding!

### **Imprisonment before Christ (vv. 23-25)**

But Paul begins with an example of the situation apart from Christ. And his example is the people of Israel, God's people under the Old Covenant, the people we read about in the Old Testament. Israel is God's lesson book for the nations.

This passage paints the bleak picture of life apart from Christ as imprisonment. Israel is imprisoned, and so too is the rest of humanity. This imprisonment came as a result of sin's entrance into the world through the Fall. Paul alludes to this in the previous passage. There he says, “Scripture has imprisoned everything under sin” (3:22). This is a reference to Genesis 3, where in response to human sin God placed a curse, not just upon humanity, but upon the whole creation. Thus, everything is under the controlling power of sin and therefore powerless to free itself.

For Israel, being imprisoned by sin has been more complicated than for the rest of the nations. Why? Because they were given God's law. But because they were under the power of sin when they received God's law, the law didn't bless but cursed them. Thus, they've not only been under sin like the rest of the nations, but they've had the added experience of being “held captive under the law” (3:23). That is, they were under the *curse of the law*. And because of this, the law's curse blocked the promise. As a result, as Paul says, “the law was our guardian until Christ came” (3:24). The law, with its curse, served as a constant reminder to Israel as a nation that they did not have access to God's inheritance, the one promised to Abraham.

I was recently reading Edward Gilbreath's *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity*, and came across a comment about the plight of the African American in our society. This person expressed deep frustration over the feeling of being held captive by powers bigger than himself; imprisoned in circumstances from which he cannot escape no matter how hard he tries; and therefore denied access to the blessings of opportunity. This is the kind of experience Israel had under the Old Covenant and before

faith came; and this is the kind of experience you have if you are not Christ's through faith in him: held captive, imprisoned, denied access.

### **Incorporation into Christ (vv. 26-27)**

But God didn't intend this situation to go on forever. It was only for a set period of time. God put Israel behind bars, under lock and key, for a specific period of time: namely, "until the coming faith would be revealed" (3:23b). The great turning point in human history is the dawning of faith with the coming of Christ: "But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian" (3:25).

Thus, with the coming of Christ, everything changes. Jews who place their faith in Jesus the Christ, their Messiah: they come out from under the curse of the law. And Gentiles, who were up to that point, "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12): they can now, by God's grace, become "sons of God, through faith" (3:26).

But how? By getting "in Christ Jesus" (3:26); that is, by being *incorporated into Christ*. Incorporation into Christ is at the heart of these verses. It means being included into something, like when you show up at the gym and are incorporated into a pick-up game; or when you join a few friends for dinner and are incorporated into the conversation, or when you marry the Prince and become a part of the Royal Family. You're incorporated when you're included.

Now, a person becomes a son or daughter of God—incorporated into Christ—*through faith*. Faith is what unites us to Christ and all of his saving benefits for us. But notice how Paul makes this wonderful reality of incorporation into Christ very concrete by pointing to a very concrete Christian practice: the practice of baptism. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (3:27).

Now, I don't think he says this because he believes going down into water in baptism has saving significance or somehow unites you to Christ. Instead, he says this because for him, and the earliest Christians, repentance and faith and conversion and baptism were often experienced as a single event, a package deal.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike many Christians today, the earliest Christians didn't view baptism as something you did perhaps months or even years after your profession of faith and becoming part of the church. No, baptism was *the rite of initiation* into the church. It was the main way in which you professed faith in Christ.

As evangelical Protestants, we've been very careful to avoid the error of thinking that baptism somehow saves a person. But in our eagerness to safeguard against that misunderstanding, we've tended to lose our balance in the other direction. As a result, we can treat Christian baptism as though it were *merely* an optional part of the Christian life so

---

<sup>1</sup> See the helpful essay by Robert H. Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *SBJT* 2/1 (Spring 1998): 6-17.

that it becomes like a Baby Announcement we send out to family and friends, sharing the good news that we have become a Christian.

There is a good challenge here for us as a church. We need to take more seriously the robust picture of baptism in the New Testament. But there's also a good challenge here for some of you. Perhaps you've been a professing Christian for some time now, living out the Christian life and engaging yourself in the ministries of the church. Yet you've never been baptized. Let this serve as an exhortation to you to take this step of faith and obedience in being baptized.

### **New Identity in Christ (v. 28)**

If you have been baptized into Christ, you have “put on Christ” (3:27). He is now your new set of clothes. You've laid aside your old self—both your old identity and your old way of life—and have put on a new person—Jesus Christ, who is now your new identity and your new way of life.

Thus, notice how this passage moves from being incorporated into Christ through faith to taking on a new identity in Christ as a result. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28).

Whatever excluded you from the promise under the Old Covenant is now removed with the dawning of the New. These age-old distinctions are no longer barriers to sharing in Christ and becoming part of his people, his body and his church.

It is not that these distinctions are erased in Christ. This isn't a proof-text, for example, for unisex bathrooms in churches! Instead, it's that these distinctions are radically subordinated to who you now are in Christ. Christ is the decisive thing about you, not that you are Jew or Greek, slave or free, even male or female.

Our adopted twin boys, Addis and Rager, have a different identity than ours, ethnically, racially, socially, even. They are black and African and Ethiopian and orphans, abandoned on the day of their birth. Yet when they became ours, all of this was radically subordinated to their new identity as our children. Not erased; they're still black and African and Ethiopian. But that's neither the main thing about them, nor the determinative thing about them either.

The new identity in Christ is significant not only for you as an individual, but for the church as a new human community as well. Incorporation into Christ, in fact, provides a basis for a new community, where these old distinctions ought no longer to determine the way we relate. Whatever tends to divide human communities is now done away with in Christ: “you are all one in Christ Jesus” (v. 28b).

These three—race, class, gender—have been human distinctions that have bedeviled the human race for millennia. Who knows how much strife and suffering have come because of strife over a difference in race, class or gender. Yet only in Christ Jesus do we find reconciliation and unity among those of a different race, class or gender.

Regrettably, the church still has work to do. It's still true that 11:00 AM on a Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. And it's not hard to see the fact that churches tend to concentrate around one social class or another. Furthermore, there is still more work to be done in helping the genders better honor and serve one another within the one body of Christ.

Perhaps we can begin by resisting the temptation to allow the church to be a place of cliques, where we cluster together with those of a similar background, experience, or gender. If your Christian experience or church experience is largely or exclusively with people who are very much like you, you're missing out on all that the body of Christ is meant to be. And it's perhaps time to mix it up.

### **Share In the Inheritance with Christ (v. 29)**

Now, by being incorporated into Christ, you not only take on a new identity in Christ, you also now stand in line to share in the inheritance with Christ. By being joined to Christ, you become co-heirs with him. "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (3:29).

Again, notice the flow of thought here. Through faith and by being baptized into Christ, you literally become Christ's. Thus, you relinquish ownership of yourself and give yourself over to the ownership of another, namely, Christ.

This is the paradoxical principle of losing your life to find it: giving up your rights to be given the right to become a child of God; laying down all that you have in order to receive all that you could ever want; letting go of mastery of yourself so that you can be mastered, indeed, owned, by someone else—even Christ!

But possession by Christ, incorporation into Christ, qualifies you as Abraham's offspring. By being incorporated into Christ, we become Abraham's offspring. And as a result, the promise God made to Abraham and to his seed is now—in Christ—good for those who come to him through faith.

Everything God promised to Abraham's offspring is good for you, if you will come to Christ through faith. Whether you are Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, white collar or blue collar, Democrat or Republican, Sox fan or Cubs fan, it doesn't matter. What matters is whether you are Christ's.

How good of God to design it this way! How generous of Christ to share his inheritance with nobodies like us! How gracious of him to let us have a piece of what is rightful only his! How merciful of him to make the only condition the act of faith, not which side of the tracks you grew up on, the color of your skin, the size of your bank account, or whether you have a Y or only two X chromosomes!

Who, then, wouldn't through faith want to receive this most stunning offer? Who wouldn't want to run to this most magnificent Savior who gave his life for you that you might share eternal life with him?

## **Conclusion – If You Are Christ’s**

How can I become an heir according to promise? How can I grab a hold of the promise of eternal life and claim it as my own? That promise is yours, when you are Christ’s.

And this makes all the difference in the world! There’s nothing more relevant or practical than a new identity, a new community, a new inheritance. For if you are Christ’s, then *fear not*, even in these difficult financial times, because you know that “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). *Take heart* and find strength to endure whatever it is God has for you, because you know that “when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” (Heb. 10:36). And *strive by faith* to live a life that is counter-cultural for the cause of Christ, because you know that here you have no lasting city, but you are “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

Amen.

© May 8, 2011 by Dr. Todd A. Wilson