

## FAMILY

by Elaine Poproski

Somewhere in the middle of the first century, probably within a couple decades of Jesus' death and resurrection, a man named Paul travelled to the northern part of Turkey (back then it wasn't called Turkey, it was Asia Minor) to tell people about Jesus. In that region there weren't any synagogues, which means there wasn't a Jewish population for Paul to connect with when he arrived. Usually, what people who were spreading the gospel did was connect with the local synagogue and start there. That's because the gospel they were spreading was rooted in Judaism. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. So there was already a foundation of knowledge and understanding to which they could add the good news of God's incarnation in the person of Jesus and our freedom from sin and death through Jesus' death and resurrection. But in this part of Turkey, in this region, which was called Galatia, there weren't any synagogues. This means that the people Paul taught – the people who became Christians in this region, didn't know anything about Israel's history or God's covenant with Israel through Abraham; they likely didn't know about Moses or Joshua or any of the stories that so many of us are familiar with. And that was fine. They didn't need to know any of that.

But then, after Paul left, which he didn't do until the new churches were established and teachers and leaders had been trained up to continue the work, a new group of people showed up. These new people were Jewish Christian evangelists who claimed a close connection to the church in Jerusalem, which was the mother church of all mother churches, and they taught a very different gospel than what Paul had taught. They taught, essentially, that if they wanted to be saved, faith in Christ wasn't enough; they also had to obey the Jewish Law, which meant they had to be circumcised. They were teaching that if they weren't circumcised, there would be no salvation – there was no belonging to Christ.

A lot of people in these churches believed what these new evangelists were teaching.

When Paul heard what was going on, he wrote a letter to these churches. It's the letter we have in our New Testament - the letter to the Galatians. He wrote this letter to remind the people what he'd taught them and to counter what these new teachers were teaching. Specifically, he wanted to remind them that it's by belonging to Christ that we are adopted into God's family; nothing else is required.

All of this surrounds and underlies what we read in Galatians 3. I'm going to read verses 23 – 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Before the coming of this faith, [he's talking about the faith in Christ that had led them to be baptized in the first place – faith in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection as sufficient for our salvation from sin and death],*

<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.*

The word that is translated in this version as *locked up*, might also be translated as *imprisoned*. It carries the idea that we're stuck in a prison that is guarded by the Law.

When he's talking about the Law, he's talking about the Law Moses received way back after the people had been freed from slavery in Egypt. Over the centuries that Law had been interpreted and re-interpreted countless times by Jewish scholars and teachers. It was the Law that kept them attuned and obedient to God's will and thus in right relationship with God. It was the Law that connected them to each other. No matter where in the world they found themselves, they knew they were counted among God's children by virtue of their faithfulness to the Law.

As Paul sees it, the Law was kind of like a foster parent. In Galatians he has a more negative feeling about it, because of what's being preached by these other teachers; he calls it a prison – that those who are focused on the Law are enslaved. The Law kept Israel safe and kept God's covenant with Israel safe until such a time as Christ would come, fulfilling the Law. It's a guardian. He says,

*<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.*

He didn't mean locked up as a punishment, but as a way of keeping everyone safe – of having safe, clear boundaries.

He continues, repeating the point he's just made:

*<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.*

We don't need this guardian – this prison guard – this foster parent – because the Law has been fulfilled. Faith in Christ has replaced the Law. We are no longer foster kids under the Law's guardianship, we are now, through Christ, adopted children of God. This is what Paul writes:

*<sup>26</sup> So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

This is a shift that's happened. There was time when the Law – this gift given from God – was there to keep guard over the people – to keep them safe from all evil and sin that might distract them and pull them away from God. But now that Jesus has come – now that faith has come – that guard isn't needed anymore because now there is faith in Christ. We are no longer in need of the protection of a foster parent, because now we have been adopted into the family of God.

That image of being clothed with Christ is one Paul uses a lot. When we're baptised, what we're doing is this: as we go under the water, it's like we're dying and being buried to one way of life – a life governed by sin and death. As we rise up out of the water, we're rising with Christ from the grave, now clothed in a new life free from sin and death – a new life of belonging. No longer are we foster kids under the guardianship of another. Now we are adopted – we are children of God.

As children of God – all of us adopted into the same family – we are brothers and sisters. Any of the things that separated us and divided us prior to this adoption no longer hold. As Paul puts it,

*28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

He's not saying that Abraham doesn't matter anymore, or that the promises God made to Abraham don't matter anymore. Paul was writing to people who'd been convinced by false teachers that they had to be part of Abraham's family – part of Israel – in order to be part of God's family. Paul is adamant that this is not so. He's adamant that that's backwards. It's by belonging to Christ that we become God's children and thus inherit all the promises God has made to his children, beginning long ago with Abraham.

Probably, for most of us, this idea that we have to become Jewish in order to be adopted into God's family isn't something we believe. We're really far removed from the Jewish roots of our faith. But I wonder if there might not be other things – other requirements we put on ourselves or other people. The teachers Paul was writing against set themselves up as gatekeepers of God's family. Do we do the same thing? Do we set ourselves up to decide who does and who does not get to be adopted?

We know that the right answer to that question is *no, of course we would never do that*. But I'd like you to take this question with you this week to reflect on. Sometimes the things we know the answer to... when we start to reflect on the way we're actually living – the way we're actually behaving – we discover a dissonance between what we think and what we really believe deep inside ourselves.

Do we ever set ourselves up to decide who does and does not get to be adopted? Do we have our own set of conditions? Do we genuinely believe that it is enough simply to put our trust – our faith – in Jesus and the sufficiency of his death and resurrection? Or do we have other requirements? For instance, are there behaviour expectations we hold to?

You know, foster kids are often moved around from home to home to home for all sorts of reasons. For a lot of foster kids there's a decided lack of stability in their lives. Some foster kids become perfectionists, doing everything they can to be as perfect as they can so their foster parents will keep them. Other foster kids act out, testing and pushing their foster parents as a way of getting some little amount of control over their own lives. But when you're adopted, you aren't moved around anymore. You have a family that will be your family forever. These parents will stick with you, even if you aren't perfect. These parents will stick with you even if you behave miserably. (Let's pause to recognize that not all parents are great and some parents are awful, regardless of whether they're birth parents or adoptive parents. Some parents aren't going to stick with you if you aren't perfect. Some parents aren't going to stick with you if you behave miserably. But we're using an idealized image here.)

When we choose Christ, we become God's children – not foster kids, allowed in the family so long as we don't misbehave or prove to be too much. We are adopted. God's family is our forever family, and nothing can change that.

These past weeks, as we've been reading and discussing our book together,<sup>i</sup> I titled the series of sermons that have accompanied that reading as *Being the Church*. Part of how I described the series is this way:

*Churches are local gatherings of Jesus' followers, together practicing life under Jesus' lordship, embodying Jesus' kind of love in the world, and offering a glimpse of God's kingdom for the world to see. At least, that's what churches are supposed to be.*

What I didn't include in that description is the word *family*. But the fact is, because we who are the church have been adopted into God's family, we are family. The entirety of all the people around the world who follow Christ are our family. Those of us who gather here at Walmer are family. We are brothers and sisters to each other. That's probably a familiar concept to most of you. But as with every descriptor we use, our understanding is often limited by our own experiences.

Ages ago I talked about the idea of embedded theology – that there are assumptions we have about God that are embedded in us, and sometimes those assumptions contradict Scripture and so we need to pull them out and examine them against the testimony of Scripture. We have embedded beliefs about all sorts of things, including what a family is. I might talk about the fact that we are family, but because we were all born into an earthly family, we all have some kind of experience that affects how we understand the word. And that affects how we understand what it means to be part of God's family.

So I thought it might be helpful this morning to take a bit of time and share some of our own experiences and assumptions about family. How do you describe family? (Don't worry about figuring out the *right* answer to that question; there isn't a *right* answer. There are just our own experiences.) You could share a word or a phrase that for you, describes family. Or maybe you could tell us a little bit about your family. The goal is to be thinking and sharing with each other what our experiences and assumptions about family might be, so that then we can compare what God's family is like as Scripture reveals it.

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<sup>i</sup> Craig Springer. *How to Revive Evangelism*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021).