What Adoption Means in Galatians 4:5 (and Romans 8:15, 8:23, 9:4; Ephesians 1:5)

Text: Galatians 3:26 – 4:7 written by Steve Laube

The Praetorian class (upper) of ancient Roman society rarely adopted children. Children tended to die early. Instead, they adopted adults (or young adults in today’s parlance). Adults chosen to take their place in society, like their Senate seat. It was not an uncommon thing to adopt a young man instead of putting their own son in the position. It was such an important event that it had to be brought before the Senate for a vote and had to have at least seven witnesses. The adopter would then pay off all the debts of the family who was "losing" their son.

Nine of the Roman emperors were adopted!
Julius Caesar adopted Augustus.
Augustus adopted Tiberius.
Tiberius adopted Caligula.
Caligua's brother was Claudius.
Claudius adopted Nero.
(More adopted emperors came later.)

For nearly 80 years, from Julius Caesar to Nero, almost the entire span of the composition of the NT, the emperor was adopted.

Therefore, when Paul said we are adopted as sons, he wasn't talking about our modern practice of compassion and charity. While that interpretation is fine and works in context...it does not come close to the powerful thing Paul is conveying to his audience in Galatia, many who were Roman citizens, and who knew the lineage of their emperor.

A Roman father could make their son an heir, could sell him, or could kill him without any consequences. The father had 100% control over the life of his offspring. BUT when a father adopted a son, he could not undo it. It was permanent and unchangeable. A forever decision. … Think about that for a moment.

We are adopted by God, not out of charity or compassion – though, through grace, that does apply, instead when Paul says we are heirs, he wasn't writing hyperbole. It's a done deal. It cost a lot. It cannot be changed. Therefore, the responsibility of being a part of the family of God, co-heirs with Christ is a really big deal.

There's more. The Romans never (or rarely) adopted daughters. The daughters were unlikely to be named as head of the family.... So is Paul leaving women out of this amazing idea? Not in the least. Remember that only a few verses earlier (Galatians 3:28) he wrote “there is no Jew nor Greek, no slave nor free, no male nor female, you are all one in Christ.” Therefore, he set *that* foundation first. *Then* he dropped the adoption concept.

Look at it another way. He *chose* you, before the foundation of the world, to be a member of His family (Ephesians 1:4-6). He knew it would cost a lot but He knew you were uniquely gifted to be a key part in His kingdom.

Why can I personalize it like that? Starting in chapter 3:26ff the word "you" is used again and again. It is a plural "you" in the original Greek meaning he is addressing the entire group.

26 "you are all Sons of God" 27 "for as many of you as were baptized" 28 "you are all one in Christ Jesus" 29 "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise” then in 4:6 "you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" (This is the verse where he speaks of us receiving adoption as sons.)

And then comes 4:7. "So **you** are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." The word "you" in this verse is singular in the Greek. Paul intentionally changed it.

He is no longer talking to the group. It’s as if he is pointing his finger at each person in the room listening to the letter being read. Individually. Intentionally.

So I took my pen and inserted my name in my Bible. "So *you*, Steve, are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." (and because of 3:28 one can change son to daughter and still be Biblical)

You can do the same in your Bible. Because in verse 8 and following Paul reverts back to the plural "you." Galatians 4:7 is the only verse in this entire section where "you" is singular. It is a harpoon strike targeted at each of us. Straight and true and piercing.