



The Best Christmas Gift Ever

Titus 3:7-11

Heirs in 1st Century Rome

A lot of times we read words in the Bible that we think we understand; words like “heir.” It’s a pretty straightforward word. Titus 3:7 says that God’s people have been justified by the grace of Christ, so that they might become “*heirs having the hope of eternal life.*” In our day we think of an heir as someone who has received an inheritance. This means that someone else had to die for you to become an heir. It’s a staple of American (and English/Scottish) law—“no one is an heir of the living.” You can be an heir *apparent*; or heir *presumptive*. But technically, the only way that you can know for sure if you are an heir is to wait until your ancestor has died and then read the will. Now that poses a problem doesn’t it? If we read our modern version of law into the Bible, the term “heirs of God” would imply that God has died! That’s absurd! So then, what does “heirs of God” mean?

Here is where a quick lesson on Roman law helps. According to 1st century Roman law, you could be an heir of the living! Under Roman law, the father and the son or the ancestor and the heir were legally considered the same person! We have a hard time grasping this because Americans love individuality and freedom. But the Romans didn’t see it quite like that. They paid more attention to the family as a person rather than an individual. Think of it this way: Americans would say that there have been 44 Presidents of the United States. The Romans would say that there has been only one President of the United States, occupied by 44 different people. In our legal system, if my parents die and the debts of their estate exceed the assets, the estate is considered bankrupt and that’s pretty much the end of the matter.

In 1st century Rome, if my parents’ debts exceeded their assets, I would still be liable for the difference because the law makes no distinction between ancestor and heir. Roman law said that ancestor and heir were the same person!

Furthermore, under Roman law there was never any “coming of age” for the heir. In other words, in our country you are legally considered an adult at age eighteen. But in the Roman Empire, the heir was always under the authority of the ancestor no matter what age, until the ancestor died. While the ancestor was alive, he had total control over the children—their personal relationships, assets & property. And this was true whether the children were of natural birth or adoption. In America, *death* is what makes someone an heir. In Rome, *birth* was what made someone an heir.

Understanding this helps us see what Paul is saying in Titus 3.

“Heirs having the Hope of Eternal Life”

Paul is saying that because of God’s kindness and love, he has rescued us by *adoption* into his family. There has been a *new birth* by the torrential downpour of the Holy Spirit given by Christ. This new birth (and renewal) by the Holy Spirit results in us becoming heirs of the hope of eternal life. We belong to a new family. The old debts and liabilities have disappeared and we start a new life. And we have a new leader. Our heavenly Father possesses us and all we have. And since He will never die, He will always be in charge! And this is a good thing because Christianity is not about liberating you from any master; it’s the promise of better Master!

To be an heir means that whatever is true of Jesus Christ is true of us. His righteousness gets credited to our lives. His work, his obedience, his perfect life—all get transferred to us! And . . . what was true of us became true for Him. On the Cross, Jesus bore our disobedience, our rebellion, our darkness, and our ungodliness.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me; the life I live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, but of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because we are sons, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave but a son and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 2:20, 4:4-7)

“Love is the descent of God’s royal grace that conquers our rebellion, atones for our guilt, and draws us into sonship.” Edmund P. Clowney, *Christian Meditation* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 47.

To be an heir having the hope of eternal life means that one day, God will finally transform us into “sinless creatures in deathless bodies!”

Glorification is the scriptural name for God’s completion of what he began when he regenerated us, namely, our moral and spiritual reconstruction so as to be perfectly and permanently conformed to Christ. Glorification is a work of transforming power whereby God finally turns us into sinless creatures in deathless bodies. (J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, IL, 1993, 256.)

To be an heir of hope has nothing to do with wishful thinking. Biblical hope is about confidence, not speculation. “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness!”

To be an heir of the eternal life to which I am eagerly anticipating affords me the power and energy to “devote myself to doing what is good.” (v. 8). Christians do good—not in order to become heirs—but because they already are heirs!

To be an heir means I refrain from pettiness and bitterness and divisiveness that poison relationships and communities. To be an heir of God means I conduct myself in a manner becoming an heir of God. (vv. 9-11) To be an heir means that I am joined into one family from every family, tribe, nation, and race on earth! Joy!