

Gospel, Faith and Freedom (Studies in Galatians)

Gospel Family - Children of Promise

Galatians 4:8-31

Last week we saw that 'before faith came' the Galatians had been held in both the 'captivity' of law (*imprisoned*) and the 'classroom' of the law (under their *paidagogos*). They had no true freedom under the law. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, to redeem them and adopt them as his own sons— with all the rights, privileges and freedom of a son and heir. This included the promised blessing and inheritance of Abraham, and the Spirit, all of which was to be received by faith.

This week however, we hear the Galatians have moved so far away from the gospel of grace and freedom, they are almost back where they started - in slavery under the law. So much so, Paul fears his gospel work among them was all in vain. They have lost their joy, their love and their freedom. To rectify the situation, Paul does not tell them to 'get their act together' or to 'pull themselves up by their own bootstraps'. Instead, he earnestly pours out his soul and entreats them to return to the gospel they received from the beginning. And, he tells them a story - the story of God - to remind and encourage them that they are not slaves, but free children of promise.

vv8-11

Just as the Jewish believers were once in slavery under the law (3:23-4:7), so too the Gentiles were in slavery to their own pagan idols.

- There is no such thing as a vacuum of worship. Even those who don't know or believe in God, or anything 'religious' or 'spiritual', will worship someone or something. This is where they seek to find their comfort, identity and security.
- However, worship of anything other than the one true, living God will result in being enslaved and conformed to that object, which by nature is no god at all (Cf. Is 44:9-20).
- In other words, apart from the gospel, we will be slaves to some idol or another.

This is what they were formerly, but they have since been redeemed and adopted by God and have come to know God, or, more importantly, have been known by God.

- Paul's 'self-correction' here is not because he believes the Galatians do not know God, but because being *known by God* is more important.
- Being 'known by God' most likely refers to God's foreknowledge, election and calling. It is intimate and effectual.
- As Tim Keller writes, "*The great and central basis of Christian assurance is not how much our hearts are set on God, but how unshakably His heart is set on us.*"
- This gives all the more weight to Paul's astonishment and anguish at the Galatians' change of course.

Paul cannot fathom how the Galatians, who have been redeemed and adopted by God, can turn back to a life of slavery.

- In this letter, Paul highlights the danger of slavery *to religion*— where a person can think they are close to God and obedient to his will, but are in fact far from the Father.
- This slavery will not be the same as the Gentiles' previous bondage to false gods and pagan worship, but will be under a religious and legalistic endeavour to be justified by the law.
- One example of this is how they have become enslaved to a religious system involving the observation of certain days and seasons.
- Paul fears his gospel work has all been in vain.

- It is remarkable that Paul considers the immoral practices and worship of pagan idolatry effectively in the same light as self-justifying 'biblical' morality. He does so because both are based on the 'elementary principles of the world'.
 - These 'elementary principles' can refer to the spiritual forces or gods the pagans considered to be behind the basic elements of the material world— earth, fire, water and air. But more generally here, I think it refers evil spiritual forces we become subject to when we worship anything other than Christ. Ultimately, this amounts to self-justification and having to be our own saviour.

vv12-20

This section contains more biographical content from Paul (Cf. Chpts 1-2). This time, not of his life *before* he came to Galatia, but of how he came to preach the gospel there. Paul's anguish over the Galatians is amplified all the more because of the rich bond he had with them when they first met and he preached the gospel to them.

- The first imperative of this letter appears in 4:12, where Paul entreats the Galatians to 'become as I am'.
 - This could refer to Paul's joy and freedom in the Lord, or it could refer to being adaptable in every way but without compromise in the gospel. The latter would be in contrast to the strict and inflexible manner of religious legalism (Cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23).
- Neither Paul's heart, nor his message, towards the Galatians have changed. Yet, *their* attitude towards him and the gospel has changed— drastically! They have lost their love for Paul and their blessing/joy in the Lord.
- The Judaizers used *flattery* to win over the Galatians, not gospel truth. And this was only in order to gain more followers and be 'made much of' themselves.
- True gospel ministry aims to please God, and does so with the assurance of God's favour and salvation by grace through faith. It is therefore, not reliant upon the compliments and commendations of others, but upon the call of God and the desire for others to know him and be saved.
- Paul is perplexed and in anguish over the Galatians, and he longs for Christ to be formed in them.

vv21-31

In his anguished and perplexed state, Paul tells them a story, from Israel's history - Israel's 'law' (torah) - to show the Galatians they are truly free in Christ. By doing this, Paul shows how 'the law' itself undermines and contradicts their reliance upon it.

- Paul is addressing those who 'desire to be under the law'. They may not think they desire this, but that is exactly what their manner and actions are conveying as they strive to add their own righteousness to that of Christ's in order to gain and sustain God's favour.
- Both in Genesis and here in Galatians it is made clear that Ishmael, the child born to Hagar by human endeavour, 'according to the flesh,' is not the child of promise. It is Isaac, the child born to barren Sarah, through 'supernatural' means, who is in fact the child of promise.
- By way of allegory, Paul associates these two women and their progeny with two covenants: the Sinai covenant of law and ongoing slavery; and the New Covenant of grace and freedom in Christ.
- When any of us attempt to add to our righteousness and salvation through own endeavours we do not gain anything at all. Instead, we risk losing what has been promised us in the gospel and received by grace through faith. Such a life amounts to remaining under the 'weak and worthless elementary principles of the world' - the 'present Jerusalem'.
- The gospel calls us to rely wholly upon God, just as Abraham (eventually) did.
- Sarah is the 'gospel-mother' of all who have 'cast out' any attempt to save themselves and now depend upon God alone to save them. These are the 'children of promise', who are free and whose citizenship is in heaven— the 'Jerusalem above'.

Paul affirms the Galatians as free children of God, according to promise. And it is this theme of Christian freedom that he takes up in the final two chapters of the letter.