

From Slavery to Freedom

Have you ever had a baby-sitter look after you ... or hired a baby-sitter to look after your children? What was the expectation for what the baby-sitter would accomplish during their tour of duty? The parents would always expect to come home to find their child in one piece, alive, healthy, even happy. The sitter would be responsible to make sure that those things happened ... and that the house didn't burn down. Simple, basic things.

In Galatians, Paul says a similar thing about the expectations for what the law of Moses would accomplish. In part of 3:24, we read this:

The law was our guardian and teacher to lead us until Messiah came.

The sense of the words used here are much more like a baby-sitter than a mentor. The idea is that the guardian gets the child to school rather than becoming the child's teacher.

So, how did the law of Moses get the children of Abraham to school where they could learn more about God? On the surface, we might assume that humans needed to learn some basic "right and wrong" rules for living. We might think that the law was a necessary background for the moral decision-making that would accompany the rest of our lives. But Paul doesn't say that. It's really important that we don't make up our own answers to this question. Paul says that the purpose of the law was to show us our sinful nature, to show us our tendencies towards rebellion, and that once we know those things, we are able to embrace, by faith, the redeeming work of Jesus Messiah. Once we know those things, and can act out of that knowledge, we no longer need constant reminders of our tendency towards sin - we don't still need the baby-sitter.

Paul says it as bluntly as you could possibly expect: "Now that faith in Messiah has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian." (v.25) We've grown out of the law, just as our children, eventually, grow out of the need for a babysitter. The law showed us what we needed to know about ourselves and now what we really need is the grace of forgiveness and the counsel and peace and power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, let's read to the end of chapter 3, starting with verse 26:

So you are all children of God through faith in Messiah Jesus. And all who have been united with Messiah in baptism have been made like Him. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians — you are one in Messiah Jesus.

And now that you belong to Messiah (Christ), you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and now all the promises God gave to him belong to you. (26-29)

We'll see in just a moment that Paul hasn't left this idea of the guardian quite yet, but here he's telling the Galatians what it means to them that they've grown up, that they don't need the babysitter any more.

1. He tells them that they are children of God because of their faith in Jesus. It was always going to be about faith because that's what opened the door to Abraham;

that's what God responded to in his life, why He made such great promises to him. Now, Paul is explaining that it is because of their faith in Jesus that they are welcomed in to the family of God, now His children. They, like Abraham, are being blessed because they believe. Like Abraham, they trust God's promises.

2. In the next verse, Paul says that those who have been baptized have been united with the Messiah, with Jesus - and, more than that, they have been made like Him. We'll see what that means as we move on through.
3. One of the first ways in which we look like Jesus is seen in the next verse, verse 28: There are no more distinctions, there's no more class envy, no more racial or political or social barriers. "For you are all Christians," Paul writes, "you are one in Christ Jesus." Imagine living in a world where you owned one or two other people and they worked for you. That was the life of the majority of Roman citizens. But if you and your slave both became followers of Jesus, would you worship together as brothers and sisters, without regard to social standing? Paul is saying, "Yes! We do that because we are all one in Jesus!" We've looked a lot at the differences between Jews and Gentiles in this series on Galatians, and in previous series have looked at the second-class status of women in that world. But Paul says that there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female - for you are one in Messiah Jesus. That means that the early church experienced a radical unity that stood out starkly against the social divisions of their culture - just what God wanted.
4. And then Paul sums up the central argument of Galatians. Because all who have put their faith in the Messiah belong to Him, they are now the true children of Abraham, and heirs of all the promises God had made to Abraham 2000 years earlier. The agitators in Galatia had been arguing that the true children of Abraham were the Jews who kept to the Jewish laws and customs, those who were seen to be Jews by their practices.

But Paul is saying something different: the true children of Abraham are not the physical children but the spiritual children. It is the spiritual children, the ones who trust in God, who believe in what He has done for them, who are the true children of Abraham.

Remember that the question raised by the agitators had been, not "How do you become a Christian?", but "How do you continue on in the Christian life?" Their answer was that you began by putting your trust in Jesus to save you, but that you continued by submitting to the Jewish laws and customs that set you apart from the world around you. Paul's answer is that you continue the same way you began. Your life belongs to Jesus because you put your faith in Him and He has made you the heirs of the promises God had given to Abraham.

The law was the babysitter that took you to school, where you learned what you were capable of and what you weren't capable of (namely, perfection). But, according to Paul, you don't need to have that knowledge renewed over and over again. What you need now is the joy of knowing that your sins and shortcomings have been forgiven and to learn to be guided by the Holy Spirit - more on that later.

But first, Paul takes us back to the purpose of the law again. He shifts the image substantially, from being that of a helpful babysitter to that of a sinister and destructive guardian - the spiritual powers of this world.

Think of it this way. If a father dies and leaves great wealth for his young children, those children are not much better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had. They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set. And that's the way it was with us before Messiah came. We were slaves to the spiritual powers of this world. But when the right time came, God sent His Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent Him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that He could adopt us as His very own children. And because you Gentiles have become His children, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, and now you can call God your dear Father (literally, abba, Father). Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are His child, everything He has belongs to you. (Gal. 4:1-7)

This image is of slaves under a slave master. Paul says that the children, even though they technically own everything, are not much better off than slaves until they reach the age when the inheritance really does pass to them. Then, in the middle of the passage, he writes about God's Son coming to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law and at the end he says that we are no longer slaves but God's own children.

There are many passages in Galatians that are hard to figure out and this is one of them. Paul seems to be saying that the spiritual powers of this world and the law itself are the same thing - that humans were slaves to both the spiritual powers and the law. Maybe if Paul hadn't been dictating this letter so quickly and had spent more time in rereading and editing, it would come out clearer for us, but the urgency of this letter to the Galatians is one of its appeals - it's written with passion and purpose. If we can understand the passion and the purpose, we can also be tolerant of the difficulties in sorting out all the details.

The main point is clear: while people of faith were under the authority of the law, they were in a position of waiting for what had been promised to them. They weren't free to enjoy what was still coming, but could only submit themselves to the law and learn to be patient. But, what was coming, was going to be wonderful. The promise was amazing and the gifts that were coming would be worth waiting for.

At the right time, God sent His Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. Jesus was born into the Jewish culture, a physical descendant of Abraham who would demonstrate the faith of Abraham. He would live His life fully submitted to the laws of Moses and the purpose of His coming was to buy freedom for us, to break us out of slavery to the law and into the freedom of being the adopted children of our loving God.

Remember that Paul is writing specifically to the Gentile believers in Galatia and he's telling them that God has sent His Spirit into their hearts and through that Spirit He has enabled them to call God, "Abba", "dear Father". The relationship between the child and Father God must lose its "slavish" character and become more "family". A person doesn't call the slave-master "abba" - that's reserved for the beloved Daddy, the treasured Father. The days of slaving away, patiently enduring until the promise comes, is now over and everything the Father has now belongs to His children. What Jesus won on the cross was a whole tribe of sisters and brothers, the family of God, free in the love of the Father. Notice that Paul doesn't say, "Everything Jesus has been given will someday be yours as well." He says it's all yours now.

These middle chapters of Galatians contain the real substance of Paul's theology. He's reaching deep into the Old Testament, into the sacrifice of Jesus and into the life of faith and bringing things together with powerful illustrations and clear logic. He knows how important this is for the future of the church, not just in Galatia, but everywhere. If the church gets the Gospel wrong, it gets everything wrong. If the church becomes focused on getting people to behave better, to be more moral than they were before, then it quickly loses touch with the grace of God. If the church becomes obsessed with appearances, with how it looks to the watching world, it quickly loses its identity as people of the Spirit. Paul sees that the core identities of faith and Spirit are at risk under the arguments of the Jewish Christian agitators and so he spells out the core of the Gospel as clearly and as forcefully as he can.

In the final section that we'll be looking at today, Paul continues the argument around the concept of being slaves:

Before you Gentiles knew God, you were slaves to so-called gods that do not even exist. And now that you have found God (or should I say, now that God has found you), why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual powers of this world? You are trying to find favour with God by what you do or don't do on certain days or months or seasons or years. I fear for you. I am afraid that all my hard work for you was worth nothing. Dear friends, I plead with you to live as I do in freedom from these things, for I have become like you Gentiles were — free from the law. (Gal. 4:8-12)

Slaves to gods that aren't even real, slaves to weak and useless spiritual powers, or slaves to a law that can't save you, but only condemn you. This is the real situation of the Gentiles, both before they became followers of Jesus and after they abandoned their faith in Him in order to follow Sabbath laws or observe the Feast Days of Judaism. In between was a brief experience of freedom, but freedom was a challenge.

It's interesting, isn't it? We think that what we really want is the freedom to be ourselves, the freedom to do what we want. I was reading this week a travel journal written by a man touring through China. He asked a number of people there how they felt about the cameras that are everywhere in China - watching who gets on and off trains and buses, even watching what gets thrown into public trash cans. And most of

the people he talked to kinda liked the feeling of security they got from having cameras recording their every move in public. I wonder how much we really want freedom, especially if the other option is security.

And that's what the agitators were offering the new believers in Galatia - security. You can belong to Abraham's family if you adapt to the external signposts. You can fit right in if you look and act like those of us who come from a Jewish background. Who wants freedom when you can belong to the family of God?

But Paul points out here that this isn't real freedom. You're just changing your slavery from gods that aren't even real to a law that can't help you be good. And so he asks, "Why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual powers of this world?" Does he mean that the law represents weak and useless spiritual powers? I don't think that's it at all. Paul held the law in high regard, even though it wasn't the final instalment of God's promises. No, I think he's saying that the Galatians are starting to treat the outside boundary markers of Judaism in a way that might be called "superstitious". They're saying to themselves that if they don't work on the Sabbath and don't eat meat offered to idols and the men are circumcised - that God will look on them with favour, that they will live under God's full blessing.

Paul's response is telling: "I am afraid that all my hard work for you was worth nothing." He's saying that their new scheme for impressing God is worthless. This is not an escape from slavery, but a choice to enslave themselves to another power. You can't help but read this as their rejection of the freedom they had begun to experience in the Holy Spirit.

Let's take some time to think about how this major theological presentation from Paul to the Gentile Christians of Galatia might be relevant to us.

If you've been a parent, or a babysitter, you know how it works. You have to lay down the law to your young children for their own protection. "Don't run out onto the street", "Don't eat all the sugar cubes from the box", "Don't use foul language", "Do brush your teeth", "Do get your homework done". Are we bad parents for being so demanding? Should we lighten up a bit and let our children play in the traffic, just not in rush hour? Of course not. Those rules, those 'laws', if you like, are things we lay on our children for their own protection. But I don't still tell my children, now ranging in age from 25 to 31, when to go to bed or to remember to brush their teeth. They are now guided, or not, by the things they learned while they were growing up.

This is a bit of a picture of the life of following Jesus. We learned a lot about what's right and wrong while we were growing up. Hopefully our parents gave us some guidance and others spoke into our lives as well. What we need now is not a greater, in-depth understanding of the rule book. We need the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We need more than to understand what we ought to be doing; we need the

motivation and power and confidence to do what God asks of us and that doesn't come from the rule book but from the Spirit living within us.

The good news: the Spirit has been given. He was poured out into the lives of all the believers on the Day of Pentecost and He continues to fill us and to inspire us and to lead us. The promise God made to Abraham was that all nations would be blessed through him and that blessing includes the freedom of being led by God's Spirit. It includes being able to call God our Father, "Abba", and it includes the knowledge - listen to this - that everything God has belongs to you. If your relationship with God seems anything like a slave to the master, please hear what Paul is teaching in this passage. This is for you. As a child of God and a joint-heir with Jesus Messiah, everything you need is already yours. Treasure your relationship with God through His Spirit, nurture it, start to enjoy your eternal inheritance.