



NO LONGER SLAVES

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Galatians 4:1-20

Seventh Message

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We return to our series in the book of Galatians which we left off in September. The message of Galatians is crucial because it is a message of grace. Grace was the substance of Paul's gospel wherever he traveled. He never got over the wonder and the power of grace. Grace is mentioned 153 times in the New Testament, 133 times by the apostle. Grace became Paul's invocation, his benediction, and everything in between.

Grace was not an afterthought on God's part. God did not deal in terms of law in the Old Testament and then change his mind and act graciously when Jesus came. God has always been gracious. He has always been seeking and saving the lost. That truth is embedded in the O.T. Paul's detractors, the Judaizers who followed him around, laying the law on new converts, thought they were taking their ideas from the O.T. They preyed on new believers who were enjoying their freedom in Christ, and attempted (with some success) to put them back under the law.

These legalists were saying that it was all right to believe in Jesus, but that faith wasn't enough. They taught that the law was the means by which people made their way to God; that God desired law-abiding citizens who kept the law impeccably, and in doing so they gained his pleasure. The Judaizers seemed to have a lot of authority. They talked about God's giving the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. They seemed to have more authority than the apostle Paul, because he wasn't one of the original apostles.

In the two opening chapters of this book, Paul revealed the source of his gospel: it came straight from Jesus Christ. He didn't get it from any body of men, not even the apostles. He got it from Jesus Christ. Next, in chapter 3, the apostle talked about the substance of his gospel. In order to establish its contents, he referred to the O.T., using the very books that the legalists used to establish their doctrine, to demonstrate that grace is found everywhere in the O.T.

Abraham, a pagan from Ur of the Chaldees, was Paul's Exhibit A. God told Abraham that he would bless him and make his name great, and through him the whole world would be blessed. As we saw earlier, Paul identified that blessing with justification. The blessing of all the nations is the justification that came through Jesus Christ.

And the emphasis in that promise is on what God did. To establish that Abraham had nothing to do with the contract, God put him to sleep. He couldn't partici-

pate at all, so the whole deal depended on God from the very beginning. Abraham's job was to simply believe what God had done.

Genesis 15 says that Abraham believed God, "and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." That is how Abraham became the friend of God. It wasn't through a lifetime of self-effort and good works, but through trusting that what God had said was true. God had promised that one of Abraham's descendants would set everything right. Abraham believed God, and in doing so became God's friend. That promise was reaffirmed to others of the patriarchs. Jesus was that seed, and once we become a part of Jesus we become part of that seed. We are placed into Christ; we become one with him. So all the blessings given to Abraham are passed on to us and we become heirs of that great inheritance of salvation.

So the legalists raised the question, "What about the law? Where does the law fit into all of this? Is the law now to be disregarded?" Not at all, says the apostle. The law was never meant to make us the friend of God, in the sense that if we kept it, God would accept us. The purpose of the law was twofold. Firstly, it revealed the character of God. The law is a pure expression of God's holiness. And secondly, when we look at the law we are drawn to it. But then we recognize our inability to keep it, and are drawn back to God for mercy and grace. The law tells us what is good and where to go in order to find that goodness. It was never intended to make us good. It never made anyone good.

As Paul puts it in another place, the problem is not the law. The law is good and beautiful and just. It is the pure expression of the character of God. The problem is with us. The law simply manifests what we are really like. But it can't cure us. All it can do is drive us to Christ. In him and in his grace we find the capacity to be what he calls us to be. When we are placed into Christ, we become a son of Abraham, an heir of the promise which God made to him.

In our passage this morning, Paul surveys history again, comparing our human situation under the law (verses 1-3) with our position in Christ (verses 4-7). On the basis of this contrast he then makes a passionate and emotional appeal to the Galatians about the Christian life (verses 8-20). The passage could be summarized this way: Once you were slaves, now you are sons. How then could you possibly go back to the old slavery?

Paul begins with our situation under the law:

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. (Galatians 4:1-3 NASB)

Paul continues with the same analogy here, saying that under the law, man was forced to live like an heir during his childhood years. One day the estate would be his. In fact, it already was his by promise, but for the moment he was just a child and often was treated like a slave.

With this analogy Paul is alluding to the same two metaphors he used in chapter 3 to refer to the law. There he referred to it as a prison in which we are held captive. Here in verse 3 he describes it as being "held in bondage." The law keeps us confined; we can't escape. It tells us what God's will is, what to do and what not to do. It warns us about the penalties of disobedience. It rebukes and punishes us.

In chapter 3, Paul also described the law as a tutor or pedagogue. Here he refers to it as a guardian or manager whose task was to control the child to keep him from getting into trouble and doing things that were wrong and immoral. The point the apostle is making is that is exactly what the law does. The law tells us what God's will is, what to do and what not to do. It warns us about the penalties of disobedience. It rebukes us and punishes us. It is a harsh, tough taskmaster that keeps us in line and smacks us when we disobey. It constantly points out our failures and corrects us harshly when we do something wrong. And it holds us in that prison, keeping us confined so that we can't escape. Now what does that do to a young boy who is heir to a great estate? It makes him want to grow up. He can't wait to reach that age of maturity when the guardian is no longer needed. "Elemental things" refers to the letters of the alphabet, the ABCs that we learn at school. When Christ enters our life, we grow up, we become an authentic son of God. No longer do we need a guardian or manager.

But the oppressive work of the law was meant to be merely temporary. Ultimately it was meant not to hurt but to bless us. Its purpose was to shut us up in prison until Christ should set us free, to put us under a tutor until Christ should make us a son or daughter.

So Paul continues:

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. (4:4-7)

What a great phrase, "when the fullness of the time came." Eugene Peterson paraphrases, "When the time

arrived that was set by God the Father..." God had a plan. When Adam and Eve made that fatal choice that threw the world into sin, right then, God made the promise that there was One coming who would set everything right.

This is what makes sense out of all the bits and pieces of the Old Testament. It is not a miscellaneous collection of moral principles and stories, although that's how most people read it. The core that gives cohesion to the O.T. is this idea of promise. God called Abraham and made him a promise. He was creating a nation that he would call into being. They would spring from the loins of Abraham, and he would plant them in the land. Out of that people would come One who would save the world. At Christmas we celebrated the fulfillment of that promise. Man's bondage under the law lasted almost fifteen hundred years. It had done its work, preparing humanity by holding them in its prison so that they longed for the forgiveness and the freedom that Christ would bring.

And when the right time came, God did two things: First, he sent his Son into the world. According to Paul, he did so to "redeem and adopt." God rescued us from slavery, turning us from slaves into sons. Jesus came to set us free from the burden of the law.

The apostle says that Jesus was absolutely qualified for this redemptive work. Jesus was God's Son. He was preexistent, yet born of a human mother, Mary. He was human as well as divine, the one and only God-man. And he was born "under the law," into a Jewish home, subject to Jewish law. All through his life he submitted to every one of its requirements. He was the only man to live a perfectly righteous life. He completely fulfilled the righteousness of the law, which qualified him to be man's redeemer.

In a few moments we will celebrate the Lord's Supper, remembering how our redemption was achieved. Jesus' death on the cross gave us our freedom. His sacrifice redeemed us from the curse of the law. He himself took that curse. He accepted the guilt of our sin. He bore in his righteous person the curse of judgment which our sins deserved. He paid the price for us, so we are no longer cursed. What we get is the blessing, the justification promised to Abraham. So we are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters.

The Christian life is the life of a son or daughter, not the life of a slave. It is a life of freedom, not bondage. Our salvation no longer hangs in the balance; it's not dependent on our careful obedience to the letter of the law. It depends on the finished work of Christ, on his death which took away our sins and which we receive by faith.

Yet many believers live as though they were slaves. They think that if they just read their Bible more, or pray more, or become more involved in ministry that God will be pleased with them. Even John Wesley confessed that this was his experience. Following his stud-

ies at Oxford, Wesley, the son of a pastor, became a pastor himself. He was a rigorous student, careful in his orthodoxy. He lived a devout life, a life of good works. He and his friends visited prisons, provided slum children with food, clothes, even an education. They observed Saturday as the Sabbath as well as Sunday. They gave alms, studied diligently and fasted regularly. But they were bound in the chains of their own religious effort. At last Wesley came to trust in Christ alone for his salvation. Looking back on those years he confessed that he really was trusting in himself and his righteousness, not Christ. He wrote, "I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son."¹ Christianity is a religion of sons, not slaves.

God is no longer our judge who through the law has condemned and imprisoned us. He is no longer our tutor, guardian or manager who controls us and punishes us. He is now our Father who in Christ has accepted and forgiven us. We no longer are afraid of him, dreading the punishment we deserve. We can love him with deep affection. We aren't prisoners awaiting our execution, and we aren't young children under the harsh control of a tutor. We are sons of God and heirs of the glorious kingdom, enjoying the status and privileges of grown-up sons.

Paul says that God not only sent his Son, but secondly, he sent his Spirit as well. The verbs in verses 6 and 4 are not only the same, they have the same tense. God sent his Son into the world, and he sent his Spirit into our hearts. And, entering our hearts, the Spirit immediately cries, "Abba! Father!" Or, as Romans 5 puts it, when we cry out, "Abba! Father!" the Spirit himself is testifying with our spirit that we are children of God. Abba is an Aramaic word, the language of first century Palestine and the native speech of Jesus. It means father, but in an informal, intimate sense. Our nearest equivalent would be Daddy.

In Christ we are introduced to a unique familiarity with God. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find God addressed as father. In various places he is described as a father, but he is never addressed that way. But Jesus always addressed God as Father, the way children address their fathers in everyday language. When we become sons and daughters we receive this unique privilege of intimacy.

Eugene Peterson put it this way:

Suddenly we are free with God, like a child is free with a parent. We are not involved in stiff, formal protocols in relation to God. We don't have to be afraid lest we put our foot in our mouth, or embarrass ourselves, or get sent out of the room because we didn't use the right title. We can address God as freely as we address our parents. It is the kind of freedom that combines intimacy with reverence. We are still aware of the majesty and awesome glory of God. We do not try to reduce God to a level of coziness where we can manipulate him. The intimacy is a freedom to

share ourselves, to express ourselves fearlessly in God's presence. We are free to be spontaneous, personal and uninhibited. Faith is not a formal relationship hedged in with elaborate courtesies; it is a family relationship, intimate and free.²

The Father not only wants us to understand our sonship, but to experience it and know the assurance of it. John Stott writes, "He sent His Son that we might have the *status* of sonship, and He sent His Spirit that we might have an *experience* of it."³ That is the role of the Spirit in our lives: He makes Jesus real. He assures us of our sonship, of the intimate and affectionate relationship we have with our Father, and prompts us to pray, using the language of sons, not slaves.

The great gift which God gave to us because we are his sons and daughters is the gift of the Spirit. Romans 8:14 says that those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God. Legalists are led by the law, hedonists are led by their desires, materialists are led by their possessions; but sons and daughters of God, Christians, are led by the Spirit. The Spirit of God is what prompts our actions, stirs our emotions, guides our behavior and determines our career.

So, Paul concludes, "you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God." What we are as Christians, as sons and heirs of God, comes not through our own strength or worth, but "through God," through his initiative of grace. He sent his Son to die for us and his Spirit to live in us.

In verses 8-20, Paul makes an impassioned appeal to the Galatians. Though he has not finished his argument he moves from the doctrinal to the personal, from theological argument to a pastoral exhortation. In fact, verses 12-20, which I will leave to you to read on your own, may be the strongest words of personal affection that Paul ever used. He begs his children to listen to him, tenderly calling on them in the faith to stick with him and what he has taught them.

However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (4:8-11)

Our bondage was to evil spirits, because of our ignorance of God. Our sonship lies in our knowledge of God, knowing him and being known by him, in the intimacy of a personal relationship with God which Jesus called "eternal life" (John 17:3).

So the apostle makes an appeal: "If you were a slave and are now a son; if you did not know God but have now come to know him and to be known by him, how can you return to being a slave? How can you return to the bondage from which you have been freed? Why

would you return to slavery now that you have come to know God?" Paul's implication is that living under Jewish law is just as much enslavement as the paganism from which they had come. He refers to the law again as "elemental things," and calls them "weak and worthless." They are weak because they do not have the power to redeem us; they are worthless because they do not have the means to bless us.

"You observe days and months and seasons and years," says Paul. In other words, your religion has degenerated into an external formalism. It is no longer the free and joy-filled relationship which children have with their father; it has become the dreary routine of rules and regulations. Paul adds, sorrowfully, "I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain." He fears that all the time and trouble he has spent over them has been wasted. Instead of growing in the liberty with which Christ has set them free, they have slipped back into the old bondage.

When I think about these deceived Galatians I am reminded about the story Soren Kierkegaard told about a make-believe country in which only ducks lived. One Sunday morning all the ducks came into church, waddled down the aisle and into their pews, and squatted. Then the duck minister took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck Bible and read, "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar in to the sky! Use your wings!" All the ducks yelled, "Amen!" And they all waddled home.

This wonderful passage from Galatians reminds us of our identity. One of the most important things we can do as believers is to remember who and what we are, now that we are in Christ.

Our recent studies in the book of Exodus remind us that Galatians is filled with the language of Exodus. God called Moses to lead Israel out of slavery in Egypt to inherit the Promised Land. After a long period of waiting, the time of fulfillment came. Freedom was secured through Passover, with the sacrifice of the lambs and the slaying of Egypt's firstborn. The people came to Mt. Sinai, forty days after Passover, and there they were given the law as their guide through the wilderness to their inheritance. But this morning we celebrate a new Exodus, a new Passover. God sent not Moses, but his own Son, Jesus, the Messiah, so that through his death, freedom could be bought and slaves could become children. Not only this, but fifty days after Passover, on the Feast of Pentecost, God gave not the law, but his own Spirit, the Spirit of his Son, to turn his people into true children; not only legally, but in our innermost beings, so that we cry out to God spontaneously and intimately, "Abba, Daddy."

1. John F. MacArthur, *Liberated for Life* (Ventura, CA: G/L Publications, 1976), 78-79.
2. Eugene H. Peterson, *Traveling Light* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988), 117.
3. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968), 107.

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