

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

Lesson 8 – Gospel Freedom, Oxymoron or Not (Gal. 4:8-31)

In Lesson 7, we focused primarily on what Paul teaches in Gal. 3:26-29, which in many ways could be considered to be the best news in a letter of good news. In those verses, we see that God does not merely desire to forgive us, to justify us in His sight, and to give us peace. He has no desire to rescue us from this present evil age to be His slaves. Through Jesus, God seeks to adopt us into His family and treat us as sons, or legal heirs, with Jesus. Paul tells us that when we are baptized into Christ, we are expected to live as one in Christ; and our unity should cut across racial and cultural divisions (Jew/Gentile), class distinctions (slave/free), and gender barriers (male/female).

Our text for Lesson 7 concluded with Gal. 4:7 where Paul tells the Galatians and us that we are no longer slaves, but sons and heirs through God. Paul has come to see that those who are in Christ Jesus should enjoy freedom not known to those outside of Christ. It is obvious that he himself has come to experience a freedom in Christ that he had never known before, and he has no intention of giving it up nor does he understand why anyone else would either. In Gal. 4:8-11, Paul reminds the Galatians that at one time they had been enslaved by “those which by nature are no gods” and by “weak and worthless elemental things.” Earlier in Gal. 4:3 by use of the word “we”, Paul includes himself in those who were enslaved by “the elemental things of the world.” Scholars have debated what Paul has in mind when he refers to “elemental things”, but most see it as a reference to the very basic forces of our world, many of which we even today do not fully understand and most, if not all, of which are certainly beyond our control. **For those in the first century, elemental things may have included the forces of nature within our physical world to which mankind has always been subject and somewhat vulnerable, but humans have always somehow sensed that there are unseen spiritual forces behind our physical existence. In Eph. 6:12, Paul refers to cosmic or world "powers over our present darkness" and to "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." It is these forces which have always haunted humans and shaken us at our very foundations.** It is these forces which humans have tried in vain to control through pagan religions, actions, and systems designed to keep what are really “no gods” happy. In **Acts 17:22**, Paul tells the people of Athens, “I see that you are very religious in all respects.” The Greek word which is translated “religious” in most versions of the Bible but is translated “superstitious” in the KJV literally means “fearful of supernatural spirits”. In many circles today, the line between “religious” and “superstitious” is very thin, and our fear of the supernatural and the forces of evil can drive us to slavery or at least leave us vulnerable to being enslaved by our religion.

Paul’s focus in Galatians 4, however, is not primarily on the pagan religions of the Gentiles in the first century but on those who were trying to bring their Jewish religion into the churches in Galatia. In Gal. 4:21-31, he returns to the life of Abraham to illustrate the bondage that results from living under the Jewish law. Abraham had two sons, Isaac whose mother was Sarah and Ishmael whose mother was Sarah’s servant, Hagar. As we discussed in Lessons 5 and 6, God promised Abraham a son when he and Sarah were well advanced in years. Abraham became impatient while waiting for God to fulfill His

promise and had a son through natural means with Hagar. Years later, God gave a son to Abraham and Sarah through supernatural or miraculous means. With time, Ishmael began to mock and persecute his younger half-brother and God told Abraham to drive Hagar and Ishmael out. The Jews were physical descendants of Isaac; and they would not have taken lightly to being connected to Ishmael and his mother Hagar, but that is exactly what Paul does when he says in Gal. 4:25 that "Hagar is Mount Sinai and corresponds to Jerusalem for she is in slavery with her children." In **John 8:31-33**, after being told by Jesus that the truth would set them free, a group of Jewish leaders reply that they were "descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone." Within the context of Gal. 4:25, Paul would agree that they were, in fact, descendants of Abraham, but he would say they descended spiritually through Ishmael, a son of a bondswoman. **Having experienced the power of the gospel message, Paul now sees that efforts to find peace with God and true life through one's ability to keep God's law are futile and destined to enslave us to a never-ending quest to be "good enough" in God's eyes.**

Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah ultimately through God's promise and through His intervention. **Left to their own abilities and limitations, Sarah and Abraham would have been childless. Their situation corresponds to ours in how we relate to God.** The gospel teaches us that God is the one who saves, justifies, forgives, and adopts us. **If we allow it, the gospel will set us free from an otherwise never-ending process of seeking God's approval and love through our own abilities and efforts.** As Christians, we are, of course, expected to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel (**Phil. 1:27**). In everyday language and practice, our efforts to live in such a manner constitute our religion. Unfortunately, rather than our religion being a loving and grateful response to God's actions through Jesus, all too often, humans elevate religion and our efforts to live within our religious beliefs to a place reserved for God Himself. The teachings of both Jesus and Paul would indicate that many Jews in the first century had come to focus primarily on the law rather than on the God who had given the law. **Similarly, we today are subject to falling into a mindset where we serve our religion rather than the God behind our religion. The gospel calls us to always keep what God has accomplished through Jesus foremost in our minds. Service to a religion or some system, as opposed to service to the God who has loved us and saved us through Christ, will almost always certainly lead to routine, ritual, and ultimately bondage.**

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