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Session 5: Free!

Bible Passages

Galatians 3:26-4:31

Brief Notes

Sons or Slaves. That is the key distinction that is being explored in this section. It is another long chunk, so it is important to keep the main point in view. And though some of Paul's argument seems abstruse, his impassioned tone, particularly in the central section, makes it clear that the issues here are highly important.

From Slavery to Sonship (3:26-4:7)

Both the images of being baptised and being clothed speak of our being in Christ and our identity now being found in him. It is not who we are, but who Christ is that now defines us – so old distinctions of race or class or gender have no bearing on how God sees us and the blessings we enjoy. God's promise, we saw back in 3:16, was to Abraham and his seed, namely Christ; but if we are in Christ then we share in that promise of blessing and share in his Sonship. Notice how grace unifies ("all one in Christ"), whereas legalism is always divisive ("I'm better and more worthy than you").

Before we belonged to Christ, though, we were slaves – slaves to "the elemental spiritual forces of the world", even those under the guardianship of the Law, Old Testament Israel. For as we saw in

our last study, the Law showed that all are in the grip of sin, under its power and condemnation. We were not free. But Jesus, the Son, came: “born of a woman”, sharing our humanity, and “born under the law”, subject to it, but through his perfect obedience to it and curse-bearing death he redeemed us, paying the price to set us free. And not just freeing us from our slavery but also securing our adoption to sonship. God assures us of the reality of our new status by giving us his Spirit, so that this sonship should not just be a theoretical thing but something we know experientially in our heart of hearts. We are children of God, with all the privileges and promises that come with it.

From Sonship to Slavery (vv.8-20)

Paul’s fear is that these Galatian Christians might give up their sonship for a new slavery – or the old slavery under a new guise. Formerly they had been Gentile idolaters; they weren’t going back to that, what the false teachers were offering was a Christianity laced with Law-keeping, which might have looked more thoroughly Biblically, but was actually a return to slavery.

Paul pleads with them: “become like me”, ie living in the freedom that is ours in Christ, “for I became like you”, though a Jew he had lived as a Gentile that he might share Christ with them. He is alarmed by their coldness towards him compared to the warmth that had been there 12 months earlier when he had brought the Gospel to them. Not that he simply wants them to be loyal to him: that is the motivation behind the false teachers’ zeal (v.17), whereas Paul’s concern is their loyalty to Christ, he longs that Christ be formed in them (v.19).

Isaac and Ishmael (vv.21-31)

The false teachers it seems held great store by being sons of Abraham, but Paul reminds them that Abraham had two sons: Isaac and Ishmael. Ishmael was born to Hagar, whom Sarah had suggested Abraham lie with in order have a son. He was “born according to the flesh”, not trusting the promise but trying to secure God’s promise by their own ingenuity. Isaac was miraculously born to Sarah in her old age “as the result of a divine promise”. These two sons are illustrative (can be “taken figuratively”) of living under the Law or living by faith.

Ishmael stands for those living under the Law. As Hagar was a slave, so too her children are in slavery. By contrast to live by faith in God’s promise is to live in freedom and to share in the inheritance. Circumcision might have seemed a way to belong, and to avoid the rejection and persecution of those who belong to “the present city of Jerusalem”, but far better to belong to the “Jerusalem that is above”, for whatever cost there might be now (v.29) is far outweighed by the eternal reward (v.30).

Discussion Questions

- What is the contrast that runs through this passage?
- What are the differences between a slave and a son?

- How do we become children (literally “sons”) of God?
 - What does it mean to be “baptised into Christ”?
 - What does it mean to “have clothed yourselves with Christ”?
- In what sense are the old distinctions of race or class or gender a thing of the past?
- What should we understand as defining us?
 - How should that affect how we think of ourselves, or how we think of others?
- In what way were we slaves before we belonged to Christ?
- Why did God send his Son?
- How did Christ redeem us?
- Why did God send his Spirit?
- How does the Spirit assure us of our adoption?
- Why is it a more important truth that we are known by God than that we know him?
 - What reassurance does that bring?
- What does Paul fear for these Christians?
- How does Paul compare their former idolatry and the legalism they were slipping in to?
- How had Paul become like them? In what sense did he want them to become like him?
- What difference in motivation was there between Paul’s ministry and that of his opponents?
- Who were Abraham’s two sons?
- What do they illustrate and why?
 - What happened to Ishmael? (and what does that teach?)
 - What happened to Isaac? (and what warning and encouragement is there for us in that?)
- How might we slip back into living as a slave instead of as a son?
- How does this passage encourage to live as a son?

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