

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## A look at the Epistle to the Galatians: Galatians 4

When I started camping at a north Northumberland farm, the farmer's son was a young boy. Like all children he attended school. His practical training on the farm was under the supervision of an older man, who worked for his father and lived in the nearby farm cottages. After the son had completed his education at an agricultural college, his father gave him the management of the farm, as he was by then a mature young man. Eventually he inherited the farm from his father, and he now enjoys the freedom of having the whole estate under his own control. There is no way now he would entertain the idea of going back to the state of earlier years!

My wife's younger brother is another person I saw grow up into manhood. He entered the family business, according to his father's wishes. This was important to him, being an adopted child. Far more important was to know that he was his father's son, just like his older brother, who was a natural son. He always knew this, and boasted about it from being very young.

These two people are modern day illustrations of the points which Paul is making here in Galatians 4. In the opening verses the teaching reaches a climax: believers in Christ are now sons, by redemption and adoption. They are in the position of liberty and relationship with God, different altogether to that of saints of former times. Faith is basis for this, as has been stated in the previous chapter, verse 26, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." Everything depends upon the Lord Jesus Christ, who He is, and what He has done. The Old Testament law system was only a temporary arrangement, which has now been superseded.

Formerly Jewish believers had been mere children, minors as we would call them today. The law system was designed to guard and tutor them until Christ came to redeem them from that situation. In verses 1 to 3, Paul talks about the then Roman practice of restricting children under tutors until their father decided the time was right for them to be regarded as adult sons. At this point of maturity, they were released from their guardians to realise their privileges and responsibilities. This way of life of those days is applied by Paul to describe the way Jewish believers had obtained faith in Christ and had left behind the elementary things of the law system. He says in verse 3 that he and they, as Jews, had been in bondage in their former state.

Adoption was a legal way by which a Roman could give the favoured position of an adult son to any person, usually a captured slave without any rights. Referring to the Gentile Galatian believers in verse 7, Paul declares: "Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ." They had been brought to know God from a state of slavery to "those which by nature are not gods." In pagan ignorance they had shared common ground with the Jews, being found under the elementary world principles of religion. Of course as Gentiles they had been worse off, because they did not have the law to guide them to faith, nor did they have any real knowledge of the true God.

All Christians are placed in this wonderful position of sons before God. 3:28 asserts that now: "There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The sending of God's Son into the world was the great event which brought in both the sonship and the accompanying heirship, which are described in the first seven verses of this chapter. Verse 4: "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law." The whole world was thirsting for salvation: the Jews had been long-time under the bondage of sin by the law, and the Gentiles in pagan bondage. Rome ruled, providing not only relative peace, but a roads system so that the Gospel could spread quickly. Jews had been dispersed into the Empire, introducing the idea of the one and only true God. Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, was the universal language of education.

From the story of the vineyard owner in Matthew 21, where "last of all he sent his son", we deduce that the fullness of the time is more accurately the right time according to the counsels of God. In those counsels the question was raised, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" (Isaiah 6:8). The reply was given, "Here am I! Send me", and the Son of God became a Man, by being "born of a woman". He was also "born under the law", and He met all the obligations God imposed upon man in it. At the cross, He redeemed those who were under that law, setting them free from its curse (3:13), and bringing them into this liberty as the sons of God. Gentiles too were brought into this same position.

Paul tells the Galatians in 4:6 that, because God had also given them His Spirit, the fact of them being sons must be so very evident. The Roman law conferred both the legal and social position of son upon an adoptive son. In spiritual adoption however, God places “the Spirit of His Son” in the hearts of believers so that they have the capacity to realise the uniqueness of their relationship to Him. The action of His Spirit upon their spirit, enables them to talk to God as the Lord Jesus Himself did when He cried, “Abba, Father”. Abba is the Aramaic language of a babe, who naturally calls out “daddy” as he enjoys his father’s company. But believers not only have intimate communion with the Father, they also intelligently realise the status of this relationship. They have confidence and trust in their knowledge of Him, the only true God (John 17:3), and are ready to reverence and obey Him out of love. Equally important, they are now known by God! (verse 9).

Consequently, believers are also heirs of God through Christ. This fact is stated in both 3:29, “...if you are Christ’s, then you are...heirs according to the promise”, and in 4:7, “...and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.” The truth of heirship is expanded in Ephesians 1:11-13, where it is shown that the Spirit brings to us now the foretaste of the time when we will share eternally in the glory of God with Christ.

No wonder then that Paul in verse 9 asks the Galatians, “...how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements?” As weak the law could not provide redemption; as beggarly the law was devoid of any rich spiritual blessings. Worst of all, these Galatian believers had moved back from liberty into bondage by accepting this ceremonial religious system, see verse 10. Hence it was necessary for the apostle to make a personal appeal to these his spiritual children. He does this in verses 11-20.

First of all, in verse 12, he urges them to adopt his attitude. His thinking on these matters had been fundamentally changed when he met the Lord on the Damascus road. It dawned on him then that law keeping did not bring him into favour with God. The Way preached by the Christians whom he persecuted, was right! He was wrong! He was then commissioned by the Lord to preach that Gospel. To reach people he made himself just like them, as he outlines in 1 Corinthians 9:18-22, “...when I preach the gospel ...I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some.”

Paul then assures them that he did not have any personal grievance against them. Rather the opposite was true: he was greatly concerned lest his efforts in bringing the Gospel to them had been in vain. This caused him to write so tersely to them in verse 11, “I am afraid of you, lest I have laboured for you in vain,”. He emphasises the point in verse 14 that they had received both him and his message as if it had come direct from an angel of God, or even Christ Jesus Himself. This had been even more remarkable considering the fact that he had either an eye disease or an injury which made him physically repulsive. The Gospel had brought them such joys and blessings that they wanted to relieve Paul of his sufferings, “...For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me,” verse 15.

Most of all, he wanted them to appreciate again that he regarded them as his spiritual children. His love for them was such that he was willing to even experience birth pangs again so that Christ would be formed in them, verse 19. (This must ever be the attitude of Christian pastors and teachers towards those they serve.) However, like any parent with children, the truth of the situation needed to be plainly stated, and dealt with in love. Verse 20, “I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you.”

First of all, the truth about those who had diverted them into Judaism and the law is presented. Such teachers selfishly wanted these Galatian believers for themselves, as a kind of cult following. By doing this they had excluded them from all the blessings of Christianity. “They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them.” verse 17. Next it was necessary for Paul to demonstrate from the very Scriptures of the law, what that law was actually saying to them about these issues. He asks in verse 21, “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?” He then refers to the life of Abraham, specifically to the history of his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Their history, recorded in Genesis, the first book of the law, has a symbolic, or figurative, meaning. (In the times of the apostle, Rabbinical philosophy credited the highest order of truth to the symbolic meaning!) Writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul fully reveals the stark contrast between liberty in Christ and bondage under the law, pictured in these two sons and their respective mothers.

This illustration of the gospel is explored in detail in verses 22-31. It helps to see the argument under the contrasting headings of “bondage” on the one hand, and “freedom” on the other. (We notice immediately in verse 22 that Ishmael’s mother was merely a “bondwoman”, whilst Isaac’s mother was a “freewoman”).

**Verse 23.** The birth of Ishmael was a natural event, by human will. In Genesis 16:1-3, Abraham agreed to the plan devised by Sarah concerning the use of her Egyptian maidservant to provide him a son. However the birth of Isaac was a miracle - Sarah was beyond the age of child-bearing. His birth occurred because God promised a son to Abraham in Genesis 15:4 and again in Genesis 18:9-15.

**Verse 24.** These two mothers, Hagar and Sarah, represent two covenants. The first was the conditional covenant of the law; the other was the unconditional covenant of promise. The law was given in Mount Sinai, which Paul equates to Hagar, the bondwoman. The terms of this covenant are stated in Exodus 19:5, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine." Israel committed themselves to it in Exodus 19:8 "...then all the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do.'" In the words of Peter, the apostle to the circumcision, this became for them, "...a yoke on the neck...which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear" Acts 15:10. By contrast, the covenant in Genesis 17, by which God promised Isaac to Abraham, was entirely without any conditions. The words "I will", spoken by God, are repeated ten times in that discourse! Furthermore, Galatians 3:17 explains that the law which was 430 years after this promise, could neither add to nor annul it.

**Verses 25-26.** Symbolically Hagar corresponded to the earthly Jerusalem in existence when Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians. It had deteriorated to a condition of slavery. "Her children" were those who put themselves "under law" and they were in bondage - politically to the Romans, but spiritually to both to the Old Testament Law and to the traditions the Scribes and Pharisees had built upon it. By contrast, Sarah pictures "the Jerusalem above", the spiritual Jerusalem, that city her husband looked for - see Hebrews 11:10, "for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." It is called "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" in 12:22 of Hebrews, and the "New Jerusalem" in Revelation 3:12. A full description of it, and of the inheritance, is given in Revelation 21-22. Her children are believers in Christ and they are eternally free!

**Verse 27.** The illustration of the two mothers is further supported by a quotation from Isaiah 54:1, to emphasise the fact that God has many more children by faith and grace, than He ever had by law.

In **verse 28** Paul applies the illustration to Christians: "Now, we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise." That is we are sons by the same miraculous operation of God, on the basis of faith. "For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Ephesians 2:8-9.

But the history of the differences and hostilities between these two sons continued even to New Testament times, as **verse 29** makes clear: "But as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now." That hostility continues also to the present day. Not only are these real issues in the present Middle East conflicts, they are also considerations applicable to the spiritual realm. There will always be that conflict between the flesh and the Spirit, see 5:17, "For the flesh lusts (or wars) against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." So, as will be discussed more fully in the Truth for Today talk next week on Galatians 5, the Christian is instructed to "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh", 5:16.

By **verse 30** Paul reaches his conclusion about the meaning of this Old Testament history for the believers in Galatia. We can use it today to conclude our talk on Galatians 4. It is found again in these Scriptures which have described the tensions in Abraham's family so long ago. "What says the Scripture?" is a good approach to any and every problem or dispute. To quote verse 30 "Nevertheless, what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.'"

In other words, the Galatians were wrong in adopting the idea that the works of law could enhance their acceptance before God. No, they only obstructed their freedom, so they must be thrown out, as were both Hagar and Ishmael. For the believer today, the same drastic action is required to get rid of every tendency of the flesh to forms of religious legalism, or to (Gospel plus works) ideas in Christianity. No matter how much they might appeal to us, it is important to understand that: "...those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." (5:24).

Finally, in **verse 31** we have our true identity, "So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free." We are identified with Christ, the true Isaac, see 3:16. This being so, the Apostle Paul now makes his main exhortation to the Galatians in 5:1 "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."

A brief review of the teaching in Galatians chapters 3 and 4 will highlight this liberty for us.

First from chapter 3:

verse 25, the era of faith has come,  
 verse 26, all believers are sons of God,  
 verse 27, by baptism believers put on Christ, there is a new life to live,  
 verse 28, we are all one in Christ Jesus, there are no distinctions,

verse 29, we are Christ's, therefore heirs according to promise.

Now here in chapter 4:

verse 4, a new time started with the sending forth of the Son of God,  
verse 5, there is now redemption and adoption,  
verse 6, believers have the Spirit of God's Son in their hearts.

Let's pray.

God our Father, we thank You that we have been brought, by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, into this place of acceptance before You. We can say "Abba, Father" because we are in close relationship to You, and we know Your love for us is the same as it is for Your own Son. Help us to walk in the Spirit, because we live in Him, and to avoid everything which the flesh in us finds.

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