

Galatians

Week 5 – Chapter 4



Chapter 4:

VI-11

This chapter is regarded as the centre of the letter. Paul begins by looking at how the son, the idea he finished chapter 3 with, is treated while he is still immature. He is in a sense a slave, unable to access the family resources and having someone else make his decisions for him. However the father sets a day in which all this would change.

On the whole then, it would appear that Paul is alluding to practices in a cultural setting where Hellenistic law still determined such matters as adoption and inheritance.¹

The idea of immaturity and slavery going together works well with what the law was meant to do for the Jews. It told them how to live in very precise detail which is what is needed for an immature person. However maturity should bring more opportunity to figure things out for yourself.

This is not a denial of the need to act appropriately but a change in how to determine appropriate acting – a change from being told to having to think it through yourself.

V4

This is the centre of the centre. It is another way of stating the gospel.

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law....

V5

This is not about keeping the law in order to be in the family. Remember that the Israelites were already Yahweh's family, the law 'keep them slaves' in the fact that it regulated everything in their lives.

V6-7

He came and brought us all out from slavery and then instead of the tabernacle in which God's spirit dwelt, the Spirit now dwells in us. This is a much better situation than the tabernacle or even the temple. And because the Spirit lives in you then you are heirs.

¹ Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 283.

V8-11

Don't go back to the 'slavery' that you were once in, including circumcision.

Sonship denoted for Paul the special intimacy that God's people can have with him, the freedom those people experience from the bondage and curse of the law, as well as the filling of the Spirit that God enables. In addition, the theme of sonship also speaks to the hopeful stance of the believer as he (or she!) awaits the fullness of salvation that comes when brother time gives birth to sister eternity. These are the ideas that need to be explored as we think about our sonship in Christ.²

It's easier to rule your life by the old line-up of options: racial or tribal identity, geographical or territorial loyalty, the demands of money, sex and power. It's much harder to follow the God revealed in Jesus and the spirit, and to learn true freedom, true humanness, in the fellowship of other followers. But, as Paul will go on to say, there really is no alternative. God has acted; we have tasted the effect of that action. If we go back now, we are denying not only ourselves and our Christian experience, but God himself.³

V12 – 20

This section is an aside. Paul takes a breath from his theological observations and makes some personal observations.

This is a heart-to-heart moment. Almost every line is an appeal to friendship, to family loyalty, to a mutual bond established by their common experience of what God has done for them together.⁴

Paul appeals to them to do as he does; 1 Cor. 9:19-21

² Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 207.

³ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 51.

⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 53.

V21 – 5:1

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So far, then, the teams line up as follows:

*Isaac**Ishmael*

▶ promise

▶ flesh

▶ free

▶ slave

▶ Sinai

Paul will now bring into the story a whole new dimension. His opponents claim authority from Jerusalem; well, maybe so, but they are talking about ‘the present Jerusalem’, as opposed to the heavenly Jerusalem, ‘the Jerusalem above’, which is the real home of all believers. To demonstrate this he quotes a text from Isaiah 54, addressed to Jerusalem herself, promising that she, bereft as she had been, would now bear children in profusion. Thus:

▶ Jerusalem above

▶ ‘present Jerusalem’

▶ bereft, but now fruitful

▶ in slavery with her children

Then he makes two final moves. First, all those who believe in Jesus, trusting God’s promise rather than their ‘fleshly’ identity, belong on the Isaac-side, while those who claim to represent present Jerusalem belong with Ishmael:

▶ Galatian Christians

▶ Jerusalem-based ‘agitators’

▶ trusting in God by the spirit

▶ trusting in ‘fleshly’ identity

Finally, Ishmael-people will persecute Isaac-people; but they will eventually be cast out. It is the Isaac-family, not the Ishmael-family, who will inherit the promises (this, of course, echoes the end of chapter 3):

▶ Galatian Christians

▶ Jerusalem-based agitators

▶ persecuted

▶ persecutors

▶ will inherit

▶ will be cast out

Paul is not concerned to speculate about the fate of the agitators. The point he wants to emphasize is that ‘we’—Paul himself, and those who believe the gospel he has preached—cannot be labelled as outsiders, second-class citizens, or Abraham’s illegitimate family. Those who believe the gospel are, like Isaac, promise-people, the free family of God.⁵

⁵ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 59–60.