

## The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

### Lesson 11: Sons of God (4:1-11)

It was only in 1551 that the first Bible with verses and chapter divisions was printed. I say that to remind us that Paul wasn't the one writing in little numbers as he wrote. The idea behind indexing the scripture was quite clever. Imagine if I asked you to turn into your Bibles and look somewhere past the middle point in the letter to the Galatians for the words "I mean" to start our study today. Without chapter and verse markers, the study of scripture, and our ability to memorize and categorize doctrines would be very challenged. Clearly the Holy Spirit was applied the truths of the word of God long before 1551, but we're nevertheless thankful for chapter and verse numbers.

The only problem with the inclusion of chapter and verse, is that it creates divides in the text where a divide was never intended. So many times we here preachers taking verses out of the text, and attaching a wrong teaching to them, because they're handling verse 8 like their isn't a verse 7 or 9. I say all of this to once again remind us to read the Bible contextually. As we begin chapter 4, let's remember that chapter 3 was only five seconds ago in the letter.

Paul is about to elaborate on everything that just said in verses 23-29 in our last lesson. He begins 4:1 by saying, **"I mean"** or **"What I am saying is"** (NIV). He has just finished the previous verse by saying that if we are in Christ, then we are Abraham's offspring, and therefore heirs in relation through Abraham. Now in this text Paul will unpack this thought to show us how we are sons and therefore heirs in relation to God.

Paul begins by speaking of the heir that is still a minor. The Greek word for child is *nepios*, and its meaning has to do with the immaturity of youth, and the incapacity of childhood. There's obviously a stage of life where an inheritance would not be given to a child until they were ready to handle it appropriately. Think of a young child who tragically lost his parents in a car accident and was left a large inheritance to be paid out to him at 18 years old. This young child would have to be raised by a guardian (a grandparent, or an Uncle and Aunt, or an adopted family), who would see to it that he grew until the appointed time of his manhood.

So we see the life of every believer in Christ in this analogy beginning Galatians 4. From birth we are born in a state of spiritual deadness, totally depraved in sin, truly enslaved by sin. Yet long before our birth, God the Father **"chose us in Him before the foundation of the world...He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ...In him we have obtained an inheritance...and were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it."** (Eph. 1:4, 5, 11, 14) In a sense then, though not accomplished before the death and resurrection of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit in application of our heart, there are those even today who belong to Christ who haven't been called by Him yet. So it was with everyone of us, although planned by God to one day come to Christ, be adopted into His family, and receive an inheritance, there was a time where we walked as slaves, amongst slaves, under our guardians and managers until the date set by our Father.

Remember that the guardian was the person who was appointed to raise the child, only until they reached the age of adulthood. They guardian was not the step-parent, or the adopted parent, or even the educator. They were the ones put in place to ensure the safety, and discipline of the life of the child.

The relationship between the guardian and the child was not typically revered by the child. By the time the child had reached the age of maturity, they were glad to be out from the bondage of the guardian. The guardian in the analogy is the law of God. It had a purpose, and it still has a purpose. I say it had a purpose because in a sense its purpose has been fulfilled. In the same way that the guardian was never the parent, but was only used by the parent until the appointed day of maturity, so the law was never supreme, but was used by God to point people to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why any attempt to save your soul through law-keeping is ridiculous. It's the equivalent of asking for your million dollar inheritance from the babysitter that you're parents are paying \$10/hour. The babysitter isn't your parent, their hired by your parent for a short time, for a specific purpose.

Paul continues to unpack this thought of slavery before the appointed time in verse 3. **"In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world."** The word used for 'elementary' is *stoicheion*, which has the root meaning of "row" or "rank". It has the basic meaning of foundational order. It was used, for instance, in the basic structure of the alphabet. Bible scholars seem to have different opinions as to what Paul has in mind when he speaks of these 'elementary principles of the world', but one thing that we know for sure is there is a pre-conversion period of our lives where we walk according to the principles of the world. Some scholars believe this slavery to elemental principles are slavery to the demonic spirits at work in the world. They draw this conclusion from verses like John 12:31 which refers to Satan as the 'ruler of this world', and 2 Corinthians 4:4 which calls him the 'god of this world'.

Other scholars interpret the slavery to elemental principles of the world to do with slavery to human religion. This interpretation seems to make the most sense within the context of this letter, since it's pressure of the Judaizers who have forced the issue at hand. Remember Galatians 1:6, **"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."** Paul was dumbfounded how quickly these Galatian Christians had come to Christ from a dead religion of works, and had so quickly deserted the gospel and attempted to blend the old with the new. Now, look forward to 4:9, as I think it sheds light on verse 3, **"But now that you have come to know God, or rather be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?"**

Quite the opposite of enslaving ourselves to worthless human religion, Christians are to invest their lives into growing in the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Notice how Paul encouraged the Colossian believers in Colossians 2:6-8. Here again, Paul links following man made religious rules and traditions with following the elemental spirits of the world, very similar wording to Galatians 4:3. This slavery to elemental principles is universal. No one is exempt, no one possesses the wisdom to circumvent this slavery. No one possesses the power to overcome it. Even the heirs, even the sons of God, are found dead and enslaved in this sin before the fullness of time came.

Let's read again Galatians 4:4-11. Thanks be to God that the gospel is true, and that the fullness of time did indeed come! The 'fullness of time' here speaks loudly of the sovereignty of God over all things in the created order. It is God who ordains and controls the flow of history, steering the course of things according to His plan and will. At the appointed time, God gave Israel the law (the guardian). And when the law had finally accomplished its purpose of showing those under it their utter sinfulness and inability to please God through law-keeping, God brought about the intended end: the fullness of time. At the exact, prescribed moment in human history, God brought forth His Son Jesus Christ, who would provide

for all of His elect the righteousness that was necessary for salvation. Christ came, not to abolish the law, not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. The law always points out our inability to keep it, the law always points us to the Saviour we so desperately need.

Charles Spurgeon so eloquently points out concerning the fullness of time, *“The birth of Jesus is the grandest light of history, the sun in the heavens of all time. It is the polestar of human destiny, the hinge of chronology, the meeting place of the waters of the past and the future. Why did it happen just at that moment? Assuredly it was so predicted. There were prophecies, many which pointed exactly to that hour. He came at the hour that God had determined. The infinite Lord appoints the date of every event; all times are in His hand. There are no loose threads in the providence of God. No stitches are dropped; no events are left to chance. The great clock of the universe keeps good time, and the whole machinery of providence moves with unerring punctuality. It was to be expected that the greatest of all events should be most accurately and wisely times, and so it was. God willed it to be when and where it was, and that will is to us the ultimate reason.”*<sup>1</sup>

The only other time in the New Testament that we see the phrase ‘the fullness of time’ is in Ephesians 1:7-10, speaking of the culmination of God’s redemptive plan. Speaking of our text in Galatians 4:4, the time was right according to the plan of God for Him to send forth His Son into the world. The birth of Christ is undoubtedly the highest point of human history. Paul reminds the reader that our Lord Jesus was God-incarnate when he writes, **“born of a woman.”** The hope of humanity, the Saviour of us all, was not a hologram, nor was he an angel, but he was a man born of a common woman, in a small town.

Because Jesus was born as a baby, into a family of Jewish common-folk, in a small town, He was human in every respect. Therefore, even though the law was His spoken word, He was **“born under the law”** and not excluded from it. It is interesting that we make a note in our minds, how Paul underscores the significance that Jesus was subject to the law. Paul is still underlining the importance, and necessity of the law, while the purpose and flow of the letter so far has been to combat against the legalistic approach to the law towards salvation.

Jesus was born under the law, for the purpose of being the only one who could fully keep the law, **“to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”** Verse 5 sounds very similar to Romans 8:3-4, **“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”** Jesus is the only man who has ever lived in perfect obedience to the law. And because He perfectly obeyed the law, He is the only one who could redeem all of those who couldn’t.

It is probably good for us to remind ourselves of the definition of the word “redeemed”. The term literally means to ‘buy back’ and it was used heavily in that day in regards to the slave market. Someone could approach the owner of a particular slave and pay the required amount of money to him, and purchase the slave. This purchase would then release the slave from his bondage, and would transfer his ownership to the purchaser. In this case the slave would become the adopted son of the new owner. This is precisely the image of what Christ has done for us in redemption that Paul has in mind here. Christ has paid the price of our redemption to the Father, at the cost of His very life! And now we are no

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<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, Charles *Commentary: Galatians*, Lexham Press, p. 88

longer slaves to sin, but our ownership has been transferred, and we are now slaves to God. But more than slaves, we are His adopted children! And as children, we become His heirs. What grace and mercy!

Verse 6, **“And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”** The first word that I would like to highlight to you from verse 6 is ‘because’. Because Christ came in the fullness of time and paid the price for our redemption, because of this we are adopted as sons of God. Because of this, God has further gifted us with His indwelling Holy Spirit. In other words, the indwelling Spirit is not earned, it is gifted together with our redemption and adoption, blessing upon blessing!

The next portion of the verse to note is how the Spirit enters our hearts, crying out to God with the words of ‘Abba’ and ‘Father’. These are certainly familiar words to us. These are the exact words that our Lord Jesus used when He prayed to the Father in the garden of Gethsemane, **“And He said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Remove this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will.”** Even the Lord’s Prayer, which we have all memorized, began by addressing God as our Father. This reality is something perhaps we take for granted. Long before I came to this church, I spoke to God even as a child as my Father. But truly, although He has always existed as the Father, He wasn’t my adopted Father until the moment of my redemption when I trusted in Christ. To address Him as Father is a privilege that was earned for me by Christ alone. The word ‘Abba’ is a derivative of the Aramaic word for father. It was a term of endearment that young children would use in reference to their father, just like children say ‘Daddy’ today. That is the type of relationship that we have been ushered in to. Just like how any earthly father is eagerly awaiting the next opportunity to speak with their children, and aid them, guide them, strengthen them, our heavenly Father is One whom we are encouraged to come to about anything. And we are to know that we are never bothering our busy Father with our comparatively ‘little issues’, since our issues are never too little for Him, nor is He ever too busy for us. He loves us, and He cares for us, we are truly His chosen children.

Verse 7, **“So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”** As if receiving the free gift of salvation wasn’t enough, as if receiving the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit wasn’t enough, as if being ushered into a Father-child relationship with the Father wasn’t enough, we’re also made a joint-heir with Christ! The climax of the entire story of the Bible is that we will one day reign and rule over the entire redeemed world with Jesus Christ our Lord forever! Romans 8:14-17 has nearly similar words concerning our text, **“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we also may be glorified with Him.”**

This passage from Romans I believe sets us up nicely to think through the next few verses of our text. Let’s read together [Galatians 4:8-11](#). Verse 8 is quite simple to understand, and can literally mean something different for every reader. The Galatian Christians may have come from Judaism, or the Gentiles they may have come from a plethora of other religions. Today people may have been Catholic, or Muslim, or Atheist, or even grown up in a good church but never had the gospel illumined onto them until adulthood. But it’s not like we were all trying to be as bad as we could be before Christ. Most of us were probably trying to be (in our own minds) acceptable to God through our own morality and generosity, according to whatever earthly philosophy we formerly attached ourselves too. But those

things which we held so tightly too could never save, since they aren't gods after all. Those things have no saving power. It would be foolish, idiotic might be the better word, for us to now, after all these years, and after everything that we know about God, to return back to them.

Just like the Jews who foolishly spoke of going back to the Egyptian bondage, why would we wish to return to our bondage to sin? Jesus spoke of our slavery to sin in John 8:34, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."** This is what sin does. It allures us with temporal pleasure, but then it traps us. All people are enslaved to sin outside of Christ. All people are enslaved to the efforts of achieving a perfectly righteous standard according to the law, whether it be the Jews who had God's law, or the Gentiles who followed their own law. In both cases, they stood condemned outside of Christ.

Verse 9, **"But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?"** These Galatian believers had experienced the freedom from sin that Jesus spoke of in John 8:31-32, 36 **"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free...so if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** The question at hand is why anyone would go back to sin after tasting the sweetness of Christ? Such is the power of indwelling sin, but the strength of every believer is found in the indwelling Holy Spirit. 1 John 4:4, **"Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."**

Paul tells us some of what the Galatian believers were going back to in verse 10, **"You observe days and months and seasons and years!"** It's Sunday, in March, the early spring of 2019. It's not sinful to acknowledge those things on a calendar. Paul gave a similar warning to the Colossian believers in Colossians 2:16, **"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you I questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath."** These believers were still watching the calendar, carefully observing the old religious holidays, along with the dietary restrictions that coincide with those days. Paul continues his warning in Colossians 2:20-23, **"If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—"Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."** Paul's warning to the Galatians who still held to these holidays, was that they were practicing a dead religion. They might as well read horoscopes, chart the stars, and perform black magic. As Paul warned the Colossians, any religion that is based upon the keeping of rituals on a calendar is a dead religion that has no relationship with God. Many fall into this trap today. How many people believe that they are in a right standing with God, simply because they attend a church service (with a cold heart) on Christmas and Easter every year. To the true Christian, every moment of every day is in communion and service to God.

Verse 11, **"I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain."** Paul's greatest fear is that he may have loved and cared, and poured out his heart into these Galatians, that they may know Christ, and in the end some might still completely miss the mark. Paul is fighting for their justification in Christ alone. As believers in Christ, He is our sufficient Saviour. No festival is required for salvation. No omitting of meat for a day helps our salvation. In Christ, we are already adopted sons of God. Let us live accordingly.