

LESSON SEVEN (4:1-16)

No Longer Slaves (4:1-7)

1 I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; 2 but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. 3 So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. 4 But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

The true heirs of God's promises are those who are children of Abraham by faith. Before Christ came, these children were minors, under the guardianship of the law. As such, they were no better than slaves! But then, in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus to redeem us, and God's children came of age. Why then, would the Galatians want to go back to their infancy and become under law again? Paul is now set to demonstrate just how foolish that would be.

V. 1 I Mean That The Heir, As Long As He Is A Child - Paul did not want to imply that the Jews of earlier centuries were excluded from the promises and were not counted as heirs. So long as they had faith in God, they were included, but not as free adults. They were like minor children under a guardian.

Is No Better Than A Slave - Even the child in a king's castle is no better than a slave. While it may be true that he is legally entitled to inherit his father's riches and perhaps even a throne, right now he is governed by a nanny who even tells him when to blow his nose! Little children have no freedom because they are unable to handle it. This is no problem, as long as they show signs of eventual maturity. What a tragedy, though, when a mature adult reverts to this level! This would be the situation if they returned to legalism.

V. 2 But He Is Under Guardians And Trustees - This is simply to restate the situation of the custodian in the last chapter. The children of Israel were subject to the law as their guardian and trustee.

Until The Date Set By The Father - The minor child does not actually receive what is coming to him until the time specified by his father. A father's will might specify that his son should receive what has been held in trust when the son reaches the age of twenty-one. Likewise in dealing with the children of Israel, God picked a certain point in history at which His people would mature from infancy to adulthood. This point in history is named in verse four.

V. 3 So With Us; When We Were Children - Before we came to Christ we were in the childhood of the human race and were under bondage. This bondage under law applied to both Jews and Gentiles, although in varying degree (see Rom. 2:14-15). It does not seem to matter whether the Galatian Christians had formerly been Jews or idol worshippers. If they now accepted legalism, they were reverting to childhood.

We Were Slaves To The Elemental Spirits Of The Universe - The word "spirits" is not in the Greek text and is entirely unwarranted here. Although this translation is found in the RSV and certain other recent versions, the earliest known use of the word "elemental" in this connection is the 4th century. It is a violent change of context to introduce the worship of "spirits" into the argument.

The right translation would be "slaves to the elementary things of the world." The "elementary things" is simply another way of saying "the law." This is confirmed by what immediately precedes (3:24 and 4:2), as well as by what immediately follows (4:5).

V. 4 But When The Time Had Fully Come - The Father appointed a time when His children should come of age. This appointed time in history was the 1st century, when the stage

was set and the world was ripe for the introduction of Christianity. Roman law had brought world peace, and Roman roads made travel easier than at any other century before or since, until quite recently. Consider what this meant to evangelism. The Greeks contributed a common language known in all nations and a religious climate that was desperate for a better answer. Both the religion and the philosophy failed to bring man the solution for his problems. The Jews contributed the synagogue and the Septuagint. The synagogue had become the replacement for the Temple in nearly every ancient city, and was a gospel beachhead in every city where Paul preached. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, was carried by Jews into all countries, and spread the prophecies of a coming Messiah. There seems to have been a universal expectation and need of a Savior.

God Sent Forth His Son - One might have expected the Son to make a spectacular entrance onto such a carefully prepared state. No luxury would be too great; no fanfare would be too glorious for the Incarnate God.

Born Of Woman - He who was fully God became also fully man. He entered the human race as a helpless baby born to an inexperienced young mother. The virgin wrapped the Son of God in strips of cloth and laid Him in a feed trough.

Born Under The Law - In order for Jesus to be able to offer Himself to pay the penalty of our sin, He had to be subject to law as a man and live up to its requirements. He met the demands of the law with His life and satisfied our penalty under law with His death.

V. 5 To Redeem Those Who Were Under The Law - Christ “brought us back” from the curse of the law (see comments on 3:13). It was necessary to become man to save man. In the midst of this discussion about people being “slaves” under law, it is all the more appropriate to speak of Jesus “buying them back.”

So That We Might Receive Adoption As Sons - Now the illustration of our relationship to God changes from that of a baby growing up to that of a person being adopted. Adoption was fairly common in the ancient world. Among other things, the adoption brought about the following benefits: (1) a new name (2) an inheritance, and (3) a cancellation of previous debts and obligations.

V. 6 And Because You Are Sons - We are not working our way into God’s good graces. He likes us and loves us because we are His children.

God Has Sent The Spirit Of His Son Into Our Hearts - God first sent His Son into the world (4:4), then His Spirit into our hearts. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, as well as the Spirit of God. (See John 14:15-24, especially verse 23.) God has set the Holy Spirit on each of his children as a seal (Eph. 1:13-14), and any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in him is simply not a part of the family (Rom. 8-9).

Crying, “Abba! Father!” - “Abba” was the Aramaic word for “father” used in the intimacy of the family. The term expresses a feeling of love, confidence, and intimate fellowship. It does not, however, imply any flippancy or lack of respect as do sometimes the words “Pop” or “Daddy.” (Rom. 8:15).

V. 7 So Through God - Not through yourselves, but only through God’s work is this blessing possible. All your efforts to work your way into salvation are futile.

You Are No Longer A Slave But A Son - This is the grand conclusion. We are not babies or slaves who need to be constantly guarded. We are grown sons, who have inherited the blessing of the father.

How Can You Turn Back? (4:8-16)

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; 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 beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more? 10 You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! 11 I am afraid I have labored over you in vain.

12 Brethren, I beseech you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong; 13 you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first; 14 and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. 15 What has become of the satisfaction you felt? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. 16 Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

V. 8 Formerly, when you did not know God - Most of the Christians in Galatia came from a pagan background, rather than Jewish. Their knowledge of the divine was limited to idols and Greek mythology.

You Were In Bondage To Beings That By Nature Are No Gods - They had come out of idolatry into truth. But even more important than what a man comes to know is what God knows about that man. This puts the emphasis on the part of God in bringing about salvation, rather than on the part of man.

How Can You Turn Back Again To The Weak And Beggarly Elemental Spirits - As discussed in verse three of this chapter, the weak and beggarly “elemental things” are the law. Pagans who have now become Christians must not revert to law-keeping and attempting to appease an ill-tempered god. In the area of making men righteous the law is bankrupt; it has nothing to offer.

V. 10 You Observe days, months, seasons, and years! - The Jews observed Sabbath days, first of the month sacrifices, annual seasons of fasting (Passover, Tabernacles, Atonement, etc.), and special years, such as the year of Jubilee. The Galatians were observing these “holy days” as well, thinking to gain favor with God.

V. 11 I Am Afraid I Have Labored Over You In Vain - If the Galatians now turned to legalism, all Paul’s efforts and all the persecution he endured would be for nothing. Not for this had he delivered them from slavery to freedom!

V. 12 Brethren, I Beseech You - Paul has appealed to authority, he has appealed to argument, and now his appeal is this simple plea: I beg you!

Become As I Am, For I Also Have Become As You Are - “I am free from the law (just like a Gentile), and you Christian Gentiles are free from the law, too.” Paul had gone from servitude to freedom; they were going from freedom to servitude.

V. 13 Because Of A Bodily Ailment That I Preached - When Paul first came to Galatia, he suffered from some physical ailment. Had it not been for this affliction, he apparently would have gone on to some other destination. While he paused to recuperate, then, he preached the gospel to them.

What was the problem? Some suggest Paul got malaria in the lowlands of Pamphylia and went to the higher altitudes of Galatia for relief. Others see epilepsy as the problem, noting the use of “despise” in the next verse. Others find the affliction to be eye trouble (see vs. 15), which was common in the Roman world. Migraine headaches, broken bones from the stoning, and many other ideas may be found. Whatever the ailment, Paul first prayed for deliverance (II Cor. 12:7-10) and then learned to let God’s strength replace his own weakness.

V. 14 Though My Condition Was A Trial To You - Whatever the nature of the affliction, it must have been visible and repulsive. It provided a real “temptation” to the Galatians to reject Paul and turn away.

You Did Not Scorn Or Despise Me - The word “scorn” meant to regard as worthless and treat with contempt. To “despise” meant literally “to spit out at.” Whenever sick people - especially people with epilepsy - came too close to someone, that person would spit in the direction of the sick man. This was supposed to protect the person from the spirits of sickness. Paul’s ailment, whatever it was, could well have caused the Galatians to scorn and despise him. To their credit, they did not.

But Received Me As An Angel Of God - They listened to him as God’s own messenger. Why won’t they listen to him now?

V. 15 What Has Become Of The Satisfaction You Felt? - Their “satisfaction” was a sense of happiness and blessedness. The same word is used for “blessed” in each of the beatitudes. When Paul preached Christ to them, they knew they were getting something good - something from God.

You Would Have Plucked Out Your Eyes - They would have done anything for Paul. The specific mention of “eyes” perhaps points to eye trouble as Paul’s ailment. This may be connected with the Damascus blinding and healing when “scales fell” (Acts 9:18), his failure to recognize the High Priest (Acts 23:2-5), his use of a secretary in writing (Rom. 16:22), and the large letters written by his own hand at the end of this same epistle (6:11). These may or may not add up to eye trouble.

V. 16 Have I Then Become Your Enemy By Telling You The Truth? - How terribly wrong that the people who had received Paul so graciously and who would have done anything for him should now count him as their enemy because he told them the truth! Surely this would clear the air and bring them to their senses!

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. How is a little child no better than a slave?
2. How is the child/slave situation similar to being under the law?
3. What historical indications do we have that “the time had fully come”?
4. What did adoption accomplish under Roman law, and what does it accomplish for us?
5. What is the meaning of “Abba! Father!”?
6. In what way was serving lifeless idol gods equivalent to turning back to Jewish legalism? (See vs. 8 & 9.)
7. Should the Christian observe “holy” days? If we keep Sunday as the Lord’s Day, what should be our attitude and motivation?
8. How was Paul’s condition to a trial to them?
9. Why mention plucking out the eyes?

10. What was the point of going back and reviewing how it was when Paul first went to Galatia?

ABA REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How were the Jews were under the guardianship of the law?
2. At what point in history did God determine that His people would mature from infancy to adulthood?
3. Why would accepting legalism be the same as reverting to childhood?
4. Does the word “spirits” appear in the Greek text of Gal. 4:3? What is a more accurate translation of this verse?
5. List specific historical indications in the 1st century which show that the stage was set and the world was ripe for the introduction of Christianity.
6. What is the Septuagint?
7. What is significant about the Son of God being “born of a woman”?
8. Why was it important for Jesus to be born under law?
9. What does this lesson teach about the word “Abba”?
10. How would you summarize Paul’s teaching of Gal. 4:1-7?
11. What was the religious background of most of the Christians in Galatia?
12. Explain this comment: “For the Gentile Christian to go back into the Jewish law was just as bad as reverting to paganism.”
13. Explain this comment: “In the area of making men righteous the law is bankrupt; it has nothing to offer.”
14. What did Paul mean by his words, “Become as I am, for I also have become as you are”?
15. List the possible explanations of Paul’s “bodily ailment” (Gal. 4:13).
16. What is the meaning of the words “scorn” and “despise”?

17. "Their " _____ " was a sense of happiness and blessedness. The same word is used for " _____ " in each of the beatitudes.
18. Discuss why Paul's words "plucked out your eyes" may indicate that his physical ailment was literal "eye problems."