

FROM SLAVERY TO SONSHIP PART 1

TEXT: GALATIANS 4:1-7

December 12, 2010

INTRO/REVIEW:

Galatians 4:1-7 represents the center of this entire letter (cf., Burke, *Adopted in God's Family*, p. 116). In this section, Paul brings his whole argument of chapter 3 to a climactic conclusion. What he introduced generally concerning "sons of God" in v. 26, he will now expand in greater detail in vv. 1-7.

The full implications of this passage can hardly be grasped in human language. It is loaded with profound, life-changing theology. He covers hamartiology, Christology, soteriology, pneumatology and eschatology (realized eschatology, cf., Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 194). Paul involves all three members of the Trinity in the work of salvation. And Christ, as throughout this letter, is the central focus.

Paul continues to contrast man's condition under law and in Christ but the difference is in his emphasis. In chapter 3, he used the analogy of a *prison* (v. 23) and a *pedagogue* (v. 24) to describe life under the Mosaic Covenant (Law). In 4:1-7, he uses the analogy of an "heir."

The paragraph division between 3:29 and 4:1 is regrettable. Paul is not introducing a new subject. Rather, as previously noted, he is bringing the argument he began in chapter 3 to a climactic conclusion. The connection between 3:23-29 and 4:1-7 is found in the word, "heir." In 4:1-7, he takes this concept of "heir" and expands it further. In 3:29, Paul concluded that all believers, through faith in Jesus Christ, become heirs with Abraham. In 4:1-7, he states that through this same faith, all believers (Jew, Gentile/Slave, Free/Male, Female, v. 28) become heirs of God by virtue of adoption (i.e., sonship equals heirship).

Because Jesus is the unique Son of God, He is the Heir of all that God possesses. The author of Hebrews declares, "in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed *the heir of all things...*" (Heb. 1:2, emphasis mine).

The Psalmist, in Psalm 2:7-8, predicted that Jesus would be the heir of all that God possesses, "⁷ I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. ⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession."

The Good News that Paul reveals in this passage is that Christ's inheritance is ours as well. Through faith in Christ, God the Father gives to us everything His Son has inherited. Whereas we were once enslaved (Gal. 4:3), through faith in Christ we have

now become sons of God. The question is how is this possible? How does God the Father take us from slavery to sonship? In 4:1-7, Paul sets forth three truths concerning God the Father's adoption plan, which reveals how He brings a sinner from slavery (with no rights) to sonship (with the full rights of inheritance).

LESSON:

I. THE LAW DISCLOSES OUR NEED FOR SONSHIP. vv. 1-3

A fundamental point that Paul makes throughout this letter is that God gave the law not as a means of justification or adoption but rather to enslave a man in order to make him aware of his need of Christ, wherein lies justification and adoption (3:19-29).

In vv. 1-3, Paul is driving home the point that life under the law, both historically and personally, was/is a time of enslavement or bondage ("we were...enslaved..." v. 3). The law reveals our status and standing before God as that of a slave not a son.

To illustrate humanity's enslavement, Paul borrows an analogy from Roman civil law. He compares bondage under the Mosaic Law to that of guardians and managers (cf., vv. 1-2). In Roman society, guardians were appointed to oversee a minor and managers were appointed to look after his property/estate.

According to Roman law, a minor was under the supervision of guardians and managers until he came of age. But the decisive turning point came at the date set by his father (v. 2 cf., v. 4 "fullness of time"). Until then, the minor remained under guardians and managers.

The point of Paul's analogy is this: for all practical purposes, a minor in Roman society had no rights and privileges, no inheritance and no freedom. The minor's life was enclosed by constant restrictions and thus did not differ from a slave. Paul says such is the condition of all who seek to live under the Law. Simply put, the law reveals that we are slaves rather than sons.

Paul is once again driving home a clear, sharp contrast between the Old and New Covenants (i.e., law and gospel). Apart from faith in Christ, every person is like a minor in Roman society living under the constant restriction of guardians and trustees.

In v. 3, Paul identifies the guardians and trustees as "the elementary principles of the world (στοιχεῖα)." Much discussion has taken place among scholars in regard to what Paul means by this phrase. Some have thought Paul was referring to the physical elements of earth, water, fire and air. But, this doesn't fit the context.

The context shows that Paul is referring to the Law, which he calls "the elementary principles of the world." Because this term was used to refer to the letters of the alphabet, some scholars have suggested that life under the Mosaic Covenant was like being in elementary school. The keeping of all the requirements of the law was like learning the

ABCs. Once God's people learned the basic principles of grammar they graduated to composition. Thus, the Mosaic Covenant was like a primer that prepared people for the coming of Christ.

But this was not merely a time of education. Paul is emphasizing that life "under law" (ὕπὸ νόμον, vv. 4-5) was/is a time of bondage (see Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 194). To be under the elementary principles of the law is to be under the relentless demands of God's law, which brings bondage.

Throughout Galatians (and in his other letters), Paul sets forth strong negative characterizations of the Law. For example, in chapter 3, he characterizes the law as a "prison" (vv. 22-23) and as a "harsh disciplinarian" (vv. 24-25). He says the Law cannot give life/righteousness (v. 21) but only reveal our law breaking (v. 19). In 2 Corinthians 3:6-7, he calls the Law "the letter that kills" and the "ministry of death." In 1 Corinthians 15:56, he calls the Law "the power of sin." And here in Galatians 4:1-2, Paul characterizes the law as "guardians and managers" (v. 2) and as "the elementary principles of the world" (v. 3).

Why does Paul use such negative language when it comes to the Law?

Martin Luther notes that Paul deliberately chooses "these loathsome names" to

show the power and function of the Law clearly and accurately, in order to frighten us away from the Law in the matter of justification. For when it is used at its very best, the Law is unable to do anything but make the conscience guilty, increase sin, and threaten with death and eternal damnation (*Luther's Works*, vol. 26, p. 363).

The law cannot make a man a son. It only discloses that he is like a minor who is under the constant restrictions of guardians and managers and thus in no better position than a slave. The Law cannot grant a man an inheritance. It only reveals to him that he has no inheritance. At its best, the Law can only show us that we have no freedom, no rights, no privileges and no inheritance. It reveals that we stand before God as a Judge who condemns us rather than a Father who adopts us and gives us a glorious inheritance.

As Luther notes, the Law doesn't produce anything life-giving or saving. It cannot produce anything heavenly or divine but only things of the world. This is why Paul refers to it as "the elementary principles of the world."

By revealing our orphaned, restrictive condition under its relentless demands, the Law drives us to see our need for Christ. It makes us long for God's promise of an eternal inheritance that is found through faith in Christ alone.

In vv. 8-9, Paul associates the "elementary principles of the world" with bondage to false religion (the worship of false gods). Before coming to Christ, the Galatians were enslaved to pagan religions and the worship of false gods.

The element of demonic bondage implied in v. 8, shouldn't be overlooked here. There is a close connection between legalism, the worship of false gods and demonic bondage.

Nothing is more demonic than denying Christ through the worship of false gods. Moreover, nothing is more demonic than supplementing Christ by stripping away His sufficiency by the addition of one's own merit for justification.

This demonic bondage resides at the core of all false religions (e.g., Mormonism, Jehovah's Witness, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc...).

The chief strategy of satan is to render Christ's death useless. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul says, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

He does so by deceiving men to trust in false gods/religion (v. 8) and thus deny Christ. But, if he cannot get a man to deny Christ, he will seek to deceive a man into supplementing Christ (v. 3). This is Paul's point in Galatians 2:21. Paul says if righteousness were through the law, then Christ's death would have been pointless because people could earn their own justification by their obedience.

This is the subtle yet demonically deceptive and soul-destroying strategy of the enemy:

Justification by subtraction (i.e., the worship of false gods/false religion thus denying Christ); or

Justification by addition (i.e., Christ plus good works thus supplementing Christ).

Whether it is Judaizing legalism or Gentile paganism, both operate according to the "elementary principles of the world," which is "Do this and live." Moreover, both Gentile paganism and Judaizing legalism end up denying Christ alone.

In a study conducted by George Barna he found that, "Eighty-two percent of Americans (and a majority of evangelicals) believe that Benjamin Franklin's aphorism, 'God helps those who help themselves,' is a biblical quotation." Further, he noted that a majority believe that "if a person is generally good or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven." Such beliefs illustrate the "elementary principles of this world."

The "elementary principles" are the relentless demands of law, which require performance for "prosperity/blessing." They are forms of enslaving idolatry. Because of the Fall, man is more inclined to rest upon an inherent righteousness (his own obedience/performance) rather than upon the imputed righteousness of Christ that is wholly outside of him (Christ's obedience and performance).

The Judaizer's legalism and the Galatian's paganism are all forms of self-justification. Such is the addiction of humanity, which Paul describes as bondage. Yet, however taxing

the legal demands of false religions may be, they pale in comparison to the exacting demands required of us in God's Law.

At the very beginning of creation, God made a covenant with Adam in which He required performance. So, man, from the start, was wired for law-keeping. This was not a bad thing because man had not sinned and thus had the ability to keep God's law.

The demands of the covenant were clear and unyielding. In Genesis 2:17 God commanded, "...of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Adam broke the covenant and as a result man's ability to keep the law was lost. However, the demand of God's law did not end. In some fashion, the Mosaic Covenant was a "republication" of the Law given in the garden to Adam.

In Deuteronomy 27:26, Moses declared, "Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them..." In Galatians 3:10, Paul quotes this verse to show that the law requires perfect performance (obedience) for justification. Paul understood that God's law not only demanded the absence of sin, but also the positive performance of all its requirements. So, he writes, "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."

Jesus repeatedly upheld the unyielding demands of the Law. For example, in Luke 10:25-28, a lawyer, who desired to "test" Jesus (v. 25) and "justify himself" (v. 29), asked Jesus, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, aware of the lawyer's self-righteous plot, turns the encounter around and puts him to the test. He asks the lawyer, "What is written in the law? How do you read it," (v. 26)? This, by the way, is the question God asks of all us? How do you read the Law? It is a question of paramount importance. After the lawyer summarizes the law (v. 27), Jesus did not answer, "Great. Now, go do your best." Or, "I see you heart and that you are sincerely trying to do the best you can." No! Jesus commanded, "Do this, and you will live." (v. 28). The implication is that if you do not "do this and live" you will be cursed (Gal. 3:10, cf. Deut. 27:26).

According to Jesus in Matthew 5:18-19, the whole law must be fulfilled. Why? The answer is because Adam broke it, Israel broke it and we have all broken it.

REFLECTION:

The first thing then Paul teaches us concerning God the Father's adoption plan is that the law discloses our need for sonship by revealing our slavery (i.e., our bondage to the relentless demands of the Law).

What does this enslavement under the law look like?

Enslavement under the law consists of living under a curse (3:10) and under sin (3:22) and thus under death in Adam (Rom. 5:18; 1 Cor. 15:22, “for as in Adam all die...”). Enslavement under law is like living in the confines of a prison (3:23). Apart from faith in Christ, all men are like prisoners awaiting the final execution of their death sentence. Enslavement under law is like living under the constant harsh discipline of a pedagogue (3:24). Finally, enslavement under law is like living under guardians and trustees. We have no freedom, no rights, no privileges, and no inheritance and in this sense no better off than a slave (Gal. 4:1).

This universal enslavement is why Jesus became incarnate (cf. 4:4-5). This is the good news of Christmas. This is what we celebrate. Paul says that God the Father sent the Son to be “born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

The Son was born to perform that which we could not because of our enslavement. The Son of God agreed to this performance from eternity (v. 4, “God sent forth His Son,” cf., John 6:38; 17:3-4). On the cross, Jesus testified to His performance of the law when He cried, “It is finished,” (John 19:30)! And in the resurrection, God the Father vindicated the Son’s performance (Rom. 1:4).

The reason we have an inheritance freely given to us is because Jesus merited it by His obedience. What was law for Jesus has become grace for us.

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