

Galatians: No Other Gospel

Part 7 – No Longer Slaves

As we continue our journey through the letter to the Galatians, we come to chapter four. In this sermon I will be looking at the first eleven verses, as Paul paints a vivid picture of the transition from slavery to being the children of God, emphasizing the transformative power of the gospel. He explains how, through Christ, we have been adopted as God's children and are no longer slaves to the elemental spiritual forces of the world. This message is essential for understanding our identity in Christ and the freedom we have as God's children.

Galatians 4:1-11 *“What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So, you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.*

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God - or rather are known by God - how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow, I have wasted my efforts on you.”

1. The Heir and the Slave (Verses 1-3)

Paul begins by illustrating the condition of an heir who is still underage, comparing it to that of a slave.

The Underage Heir

Paul states, *“What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate.”* Even though the heir is the rightful owner of the estate, he has no practical access to its privileges and responsibilities until he comes of age. Before then, he is under the authority of guardians and trustees who manage his affairs. This analogy highlights the temporary nature of the heir’s status. While he is the future master of the estate, his current experience is one of restriction and discipline, similar to that of a slave. This situation is meant to be temporary, with a defined endpoint when he will fully step into his inheritance.

Slavery to the Elemental Spiritual Forces

Paul continues, *“So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world.”* The term *“elemental spiritual forces”* (Greek: *stoicheia*) refers to the basic principles or fundamental elements of the world. Before coming to faith in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles were in bondage to these forces, whether through the Law or through pagan practices. The reference to *“elemental spiritual forces”* underscores the universal nature of human bondage. Both Jews, bound by the Law, and Gentiles, bound by pagan religions and philosophies, were enslaved to systems that could not bring true freedom. This bondage was characterized by a lack of spiritual maturity and an inability to access the full privileges of God’s promise.

The Temporary Nature of the Law

Paul's comparison of the underage heir to a slave serves to highlight once again the temporary role of the Law. Just as the heir is under the control of guardians until the time set by his father, so the Law functioned as a guardian until the coming of Christ. This period of guardianship was meant to prepare God's people for the full realization of their inheritance in Christ. Understanding the temporary nature of the Law helps us appreciate its role in God's redemptive plan. The Law was never intended to be the final solution but a preparatory stage leading to the fullness of time when Christ would come to fulfill God's promise.

2. The Fullness of Time and Redemption (Verses 4-5)

Paul now transitions to the pivotal moment in history when God sent His Son to redeem humanity.

The Fullness of Time

Paul declares, *"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law."* The phrase *"the fullness of time"* indicates that God's redemptive plan was executed at the precise moment He had determined. This timing reflects God's sovereignty and perfect wisdom in orchestrating the events of history. The fullness of time signifies the culmination of God's preparatory work through the Law and the prophets. It was the appointed moment for the arrival of the Messiah, when all the conditions were ripe for the fulfillment of God's promise. This timing emphasizes God's control over history and His faithfulness in keeping His promises.

The Incarnation of Christ

Paul emphasizes that God sent His Son, *"born of a woman, born under the law."* This dual description highlights both the divinity and humanity of Christ. He was fully God, sent from the Father, and fully human, born of a woman. Moreover, being born under the law, Christ subjected Himself to the same conditions as those He came to redeem. The incarnation of Christ is central to the gospel message. By becoming fully human, Jesus identified with our condition, experiencing the limitations and challenges of human life. By being born under the law, He fulfilled its requirements perfectly, enabling Him to redeem those who were under its condemnation.

Redemption and Adoption

Paul continues, *"to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship."* Christ's redemptive work involves both liberation and transformation. He redeemed us from the bondage of the law, purchasing our freedom through His sacrificial death. This redemption was not merely a release from slavery but also a transition to a new status as adopted children of God. Adoption as sons and daughters signifies a profound change in our relationship with God. We are no longer slaves but beloved children, with all the rights and privileges that come with being part of God's family. This transformation is clear evidence of God's grace and the effectiveness of Christ's redeeming work.

3. The Spirit of Sonship (Verses 6-7)

Paul now explains the implications of our adoption, highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in affirming our new identity.

The Spirit's Presence

Paul states, *"Because you are his sons (and daughters), God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'"* The presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts is the evidence of our adoption and the guarantee of our inheritance. The Spirit's indwelling signifies our intimate relationship with God as our Father.

The cry of “*Abba, Father*” reflects the deep, personal connection we have with God. The term “*Abba*” is an Aramaic word that conveys intimacy and affection, it’s akin to “*Daddy*” in English. This a relationship which is characterized by trust, love, and a sense of belonging, and it’s made possible through the work of the Holy Spirit.

From Slavery to Sonship

Paul declares, “*So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.*” This statement encapsulates the profound transformation brought about by the gospel. We have moved from a state of slavery to sin and the law to being God’s adopted children, enjoying our full inheritance in God’s family.

This transformation has significant implications for our identity and our daily lives. As God’s children, we are no longer defined by our past failures or by the constraints of the law. We are defined by our relationship with God, with all the privileges and responsibilities that come with being His heirs.

Heirs of God

Being an heir of God means that we are recipients of His promises and blessings. Our inheritance includes eternal life, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the assurance of God’s love and faithfulness. This inheritance shapes our identity and our hope, grounding us in the certainty of God’s promises.

Living as heirs of God involves embracing our spiritual inheritance and allowing it to shape every part of our lives. It means living with confidence and hope, knowing that we are beloved children of God and recipients of His blessings. This perspective empowers us to live with purpose and joy, reflecting the love and grace of our Heavenly Father.

4. The Danger of Returning to Slavery (Verses 8-11)

Paul warns the Galatians against turning back to their former state of bondage.

The Former Slavery

Paul reminds them, “*Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods.*” Before coming to faith in Christ, the Galatians were enslaved to false gods and pagan practices. This bondage was marked by ignorance of the true God and subjugation to powerless idols.

The reference to their former slavery highlights the futility and misery of life apart from God. The idols they served could not provide true freedom or fulfillment. This reminder serves as a contrast to the new life they have in Christ and a warning against returning to their former state.

Knowing God and Being Known by God

Paul continues, “*But now that you know God - or rather are known by God - how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?*” The shift from not knowing God to knowing Him - and more importantly, being known by Him - marks a fundamental change in their relationship with the divine.

Being known by God underscores the personal and relational nature of our salvation. It is not merely about intellectual knowledge but about a deep, intimate relationship initiated by God. This relationship is transformative, offering true freedom and purpose. Paul’s question challenges the Galatians to recognize the folly of turning back to their former bondage.

Observing Special Days

Paul points out, “*You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!*” The Galatians were adopting Jewish ceremonial practices, believing that these observances would enhance their spiritual standing. This return to legalistic practices was a huge step back – leading them right into bondage again, and contradicting the radical freedom they had been given in Christ.

The observance of special days reflects a reliance on external rituals rather than on the internal work of the Spirit. While such practices may have cultural or traditional significance, they cannot bring about true righteousness or spiritual maturity. Paul’s critique emphasizes the sufficiency of Christ’s work and the futility of relying on legalistic observances.

Paul’s Concern

Paul expresses his concern, “*I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.*” This heartfelt expression reveals Paul’s deep pastoral care for the Galatians. He is worried that their return to legalism might nullify the progress they have made in their faith journey. Paul’s concern underscores the importance of perseverance in the faith.

The gospel is not merely the starting point of our journey but the foundation upon which we must build our entire lives – every single day. Returning to legalism or any form of bondage severely undermines the transformative work of the gospel and threatens our spiritual growth.

5. Practical Applications for Our Lives

As we reflect on Galatians 4:1-11, several practical applications emerge for our lives today.

Embrace Your Identity as God’s Child

Paul’s teaching on adoption challenges us to embrace our identity as God’s beloved children. We are no longer slaves to sin or the law; we are sons and daughters of God, with all the rights and privileges that come with this new status. Embracing our identity as God’s children involves living out this truth in our daily lives. It means seeing ourselves as God sees us and allowing His love and grace to shape our actions, attitudes, and relationships. This identity empowers us to live in freedom and to reflect Christ’s character in all that we do.

Live in the Freedom of the Gospel

Paul’s warning against returning to slavery calls us to live in the freedom that the gospel provides. We must resist the temptation to rely on legalistic practices or external rituals for our righteousness and instead trust in the sufficiency of Christ’s work. Living in the freedom of the gospel involves a continual reliance on God’s grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It means rejecting any attempts to earn God’s favour through our efforts – instead, always resting in the finished work of Christ. This freedom empowers us to live with joy, confidence, and purpose.

Cultivate Intimacy with God

Paul’s emphasis on knowing God and being known by God challenges us to cultivate a deep, personal relationship with Him. Our faith is not about adhering to a set of rules but about experiencing the transformative power of God’s love and empowering presence in our lives. Cultivating intimacy with God involves spending time in prayer, worship, and the study of His Word. It means seeking His guidance, listening to His voice, and allowing Him to work in and through us. This relationship is the foundation of our faith and the source of our spiritual growth.

Guard Against Legalism

Paul's critique of the Galatians' observance of special days serves as a warning against all legalism. We must be vigilant in identifying and rejecting any legalistic tendencies in our own lives. Our righteousness before God is based solely on God's grace and is embraced by faith in Christ and His finished work, not on our own performance or adherence to external rituals. Guarding against legalism involves a commitment to the truth of the gospel and a reliance on God's grace. It means recognizing the sufficiency of Christ's work and rejecting any attempts to try and add to it. By embracing the simplicity of faith, we can experience the fullness of God's grace and live in the freedom He provides.

Persevere in the Faith

Paul's concern for the Galatians' spiritual well-being challenges us to persevere in our faith journey. The gospel is not only the starting point but also the foundation upon which we must build our entire lives. We must remain steadfast in our reliance on Christ and avoid returning to any form of bondage. Persevering in the faith involves a continual commitment to growth and maturity. It means staying grounded in the truth of the gospel, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and remaining connected to the community of believers. By persevering, we can experience the transformative power of the gospel and reflect Christ's love to the world.

Conclusion

As we conclude our reflection on Galatians 4:1-11, we are reminded of the profound transformation which the gospel brings. Through Christ, we have moved from a state of slavery to being a child of God, receiving the Spirit of God and becoming heirs of His promises. Paul's teaching challenges us to embrace our identity as God's children; live in the freedom of the gospel; cultivate intimacy with God; guard against legalism; and persevere in our faith journey.

May we be a people who live out these truths with integrity, standing firm in our faith and reflecting the love and grace of Christ in all that we do. Let us strive to maintain the unity of the body of Christ, working together to advance His kingdom and bring glory to His name.