

Those who insisted on observing the law, Paul considered to be Abraham's children through Ishmael, bound by the law. Remember, of course, this is allegorical and actual bloodline is of no consequence to Paul.

As God's children by faith, Paul argued, the Galatians were descended from Abraham, through Isaac, through promise, and were free from the law.

This freedom brings with it the opportunity for us to enter into the fulness of what it means to be child of God. In-dwelt by the Holy Spirit, our hearts cry out to God, "Abba, father," as we rejoice in our new relations of love with him through faith in Christ.

Next week we how Paul moves away from his appeals to the Galatians on the basis of the role of faith and law, away from the theme of promise, and instead warns them directly of the danger of attempting to supplement faith with circumcision.



Reflections on Galatians

Galatians 4:1-20

"Abba! Father!"

Paul moves from the idea of the law as a gaoler to the law as a guardian or manager. The people are compared to children under a teacher, who are no better than slaves. When Christ comes the children, are freed from their guardian and adopted into the full sonship of God.

Paul appeals to the Galatians on the basis of their prior relationship, expressing pain that their previous love for him now appears to have been replaced by hatred, because he would not compromise in telling them the truth of the gospel.

Paul then appeals to the law itself, using the allegory of Hagar and Sarah to compare those under the law with those enjoying freedom in Christ and the benefits of God's promise to Abraham.

Last week we saw how Paul appealed to the experiences of the Galatian Christians themselves, and to the experience of Abraham, to argue that God's promises, particularly the promise of the Holy Spirit, came through faith in Christ and not through works of the law. We saw how Paul introduced the ideas of the law as a curse, and as a gaoler keeping God's people bound until Christ should arrive.

At the end of chapter three, and the beginning of chapter four, Paul starts to think more positively about the role of the law, adding the metaphor of the law as a guardian or manager.

Paul, looking forward to the fact that those who have a living faith in Jesus Christ would become the sons and daughters of God, now reinterprets the law as a guardian, perhaps as a schoolmaster, whose task was to protect and train God's children until they reached maturity by faith in Christ.

When God's children reach that maturity, they are ready to accept salvation by faith alone, and are united with Christ by the Holy Spirit.

This unity is a re-birth symbolised in the act of baptism.

For Paul, this is the defining trait of a person: race, status, or gender, count for nothing. The world is divided only into those who have faith Christ, and those who do not, and those who do are Abraham's children, and heirs of God's promise.

It is important for all God's children to reach this stage of maturity, otherwise, Paul says, they are no better than slaves. Slaves to the law, and to what Paul refers to as "elementary principles," by which he means pagan practices and demonic influence.

When Christ came, he came as one of us. He was, at the same time, Son of God, and, as Paul puts it, "born of woman." That is perfect God and perfect humanity united in one person. He was born as one living under the law so that he could reap the consequence of our sin, and release us from the law.

Paul wonders how the Galatian Christians, having experienced this freedom, could now seek to be bound once more by the law, by "weak and worthless elementary principles."

Paul even wonders if perhaps his work among the Galatians had been fruitless, and that they had never really found faith, that as Paul says he may have laboured over them in vain.

Such was Paul's disappointment at their failure to enter fully into the freedom Christ won for them. Paul feels personally aggrieved, rejected, the gospel he lived and suffered for being counted of little value by the Galatians.

Paul reflects on the relationship he had had with them previously. Remembering that he had come to them, and stayed with them, as a result of illness, and that they had cared for him, loved him, and spent themselves for him.

Now it seems, that because Paul will not compromise on the truth, they consider him almost an enemy. Paul is in anguish for then, perplexed at their lack of understanding.

Later in the chapter Paul moves away from these personal considerations, and offers another challenge.

The Galatian Christians are being drawn back to the law, then let the law itself teach them. Paul says, "you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?"

Paul now elaborates, from the Old Testament, the law, the story of Sarah and Hagar as an allegory, that is as a story with a hidden meaning. As before this story relates to the person of Abraham, his family, and the promises of God.

Abraham had two sons. One by his wife Sarah, who was Isaac, and the other by his wife's maid servant Hagar, who was Ishmael. Both were Abraham's sons, but only one, Isaac, was born as a result of God's promise.

The other son, Ishmael, was born out of the scheming of Sarah and Abraham, thinking that they could provide an heir for Abraham, outside of the promises of God.

Paul interprets these two sons as two covenants. The son born through the promise represented the covenant of promise, and the new Jerusalem. The son born from the slave woman, Hagar, represented the covenant of slavery to the law, given at Mount Sinai, and the Jerusalem of the first century.

Abraham has two lines of descent, one through the promise of God, and one enslaved to the law. What Paul is telling the Galatians is that they are deemed to be Abraham's children through Isaac, through promise, and in freedom from the law.