

## ‘Slave or free?’ (12)

I heard a story about two lawyers who walked into a restaurant. They put their briefcases on the floor and order two coffees, they get their coffee and pull out lunches from their briefcases. ‘Sorry,’ the waitress says, ‘You can’t eat your own food here.’ And so, the lawyers look at one another, shrugged their shoulders and swapped sandwiches.

Now strictly speaking those two lawyers didn’t break the law according to what the waitress said, but we all know what the law in that restaurant actually meant. It meant you couldn’t bring your own food in and eat it, you must eat their food.

Now this is much like the legalisers that Paul was trying to deal with in the **Book of Galatians**. They knew the law but didn’t understand it, they knew the law but misapplied it. And they wanted to swap the law of freedom for the law of slavery.

As we continue our way through Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we’re going to see that Paul is going to speak a few home truths so that the Galatians can finally understand Paul’s point. Remember there are some legalistic Judizers who were trying to persuade the church to go back to the Law of Moses. They were causing all sorts of trouble for these young Christians with their teaching which left them confused and unhappy. And so, Paul is going to use a Biblical illustration to emphasise the truth he’s been writing. He’s going to talk about an Old Testament event which the Jews would have been very familiar with.

**Galatians 4:21-23** “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise”.

Paul begins by asking a question that is directed to those who are seeking to return to law. And he challenges them to listen to what the law says. He says that Abraham had two sons, both of which came from Abraham. **Genesis 16** tells us that Ishmael was born of an Egyptian slave woman named Hagar. We know the story where Abraham and Sarah are desperate for a child and so Sarah comes up with the idea of Abraham sleeping with Hagar to which Abraham agrees. But what they’re really trying to do is, help God out on their own, they’re trying to bring about the fulfilment of God’s promise of a son through his seed.

And so, Ishmael was born through natural circumstances. But as we all know this wasn’t the way God wanted it to happen. The work of Abraham and Sarah couldn’t bring about the fulfilment of the promise, **why?** Well simply because the fulfilment of the promise must be done by the grace of God. **Genesis 21** tells us that Isaac was born of a freewoman, Sarah.

But it was Isaac who was born of Sarah according to the grace of God. **Hebrews 11:11** “And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.” You see, Sarah was well past child bearing age, that’s why she got Hagar involved because she couldn’t have children. And so, Ishmael was born as a result of man’s effort to work out God’s promise. But Isaac was born as a result of God’s work to carry out the fulfilment of His promise to Abraham.

Paul continues his argument and says **Galatians 4:24-27** “These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: “Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.”

Paul says Hagar and Sarah are two covenants figuratively speaking, in other words we’ve not to take them as literal. He says, Ishmael represents the covenant that is from Mount Sinai, the covenant which contained the law that brought death. And the reason it brought death is because no one could keep the law perfectly in order to be right with God.

Paul says all the law did was bring slavery and death, not life. The law couldn’t deal with our sin problem and the law couldn’t save you. What the law did was highlight the fact that we do sin and that we’re all sinners. And so, it pointed us to see that we need someone else to deal with our sin problem.

Hebrews 10:1-4 “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers, would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

All the animal sacrifices of the world couldn't take away our sin and so for us to be justified or be right with God, we have to look elsewhere. We have to look to Jesus, because He was the One who showed us God's grace by offering Himself upon the cross as the sacrificial Lamb of God. In other words, He took our sin upon Himself, He made us right with God and it's because of Jesus that we now stand justified, just as if we hadn't sinned.

Paul says that this covenant and law that were established on Mount Sinai were represented by Jerusalem that stood at the time Paul wrote the letter. And it seems that Jerusalem was still the centre of religious reference for the Judaizing teachers. Paul's point is that there's a huge difference between the covenant and the law which was given on Mount Sinai and this law that the Judaizers were promoting.

But loved ones the Jews had been drifting away from the law for years. In fact, by the time Jesus came on the scene, the Jews had introduced hundreds of extra laws which were nowhere to be found within the Old Testament. That's why Jesus was always having a go at the religious leaders for teaching the traditions of men. The Jewish religious leaders had added numerous practices to the original Old Testament laws in order that the laws of the Old Testament be strictly kept.

One example is found in **Mark 7** where the disciples were eating food without washing their hands first. **Mark 7:1-4** “The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)”

Where in the Old Testament is the law about washing your hands before you eat and the law about washing cups, pitchers and kettles? The Pharisees had developed a system of **613 laws**, **365** negative commands and **248** positive laws. But by the time Christ came it had produced a heartless, cold, and arrogant brand of righteousness.

This was the religion that Paul came from and he himself thought at one time, if he keeps all these ceremonial laws and the law of Moses then he can be saved. But he came to understand that he was wrong in his theology but it took a visit from Jesus Himself on the road to Damascus for him to come to that realisation. You see loved ones as Christians we're under the law of Christ but even today some Christians want to turn this into a legal means of being right with God.

I remember one-night teaching about fasting and this one brother started to raise his voice and tried to convince everyone that Jesus commanded fasting, despite the fact there is no such commandment given to Christians. Another time there was a brother who tried to convince everyone that you have to be baptised by a church of Christ minister or your baptism is invalid.

Loved ones, show me one Scripture where it emphasises the importance of the person doing the baptism. It's not there, and that's because the emphasis is always on the one being baptised, not the one doing the baptism. These brethren are doing the very thing that Paul said we shouldn't do. Paul said in **1 Corinthians 4:6** ‘Do not go beyond what is written.’

Let me share with you a story about a man names **Hans**, who was a tailor. Because of **Hans'** reputation, a very wealthy man ordered a tailor-made suit but when he went to pick up his suit, the man found that one sleeve twisted that way and the other this way, one shoulder bugled out and the other caved in. He pulled and struggled, wrenched and twisted, then finally he managed to make his body fit. As he returned home on the bus, another passenger noticed his odd appearance and asked if **Hans** the tailor had made the suit and so with a proud voice he said ‘yes’. The passenger went on to say, ‘amazing! I knew that **Hans** was a good tailor, but I had no idea he could make a suit fit so perfectly on someone as deformed as you.’

You see loved ones, that's what so many legalisers do.

They get some idea of what the Christian faith should look like, then they push and shove other Christians into the most outrageous conformations until they fit wonderfully. And that's what these legalisers in the Galatian church were trying to do with other Christians.

Paul continues and says that Isaac represents the covenant that we now have with God. This covenant relationship originated because of the grace of God and this covenant relationship brings freedom, not slavery. It's the heavenly Jerusalem that is the focal point of worship for those who are born of the freewoman by faith. Those of the freewoman don't find their authority in the physical Jerusalem of Palestine, but in the heavenly Jerusalem from where Paul received the Gospel. And to further make his point, Paul quotes **Isaiah 54:1** where Isaiah depicted the desolate city of Jerusalem which would be restored to bring forth children once again.

In other words, the children of Abraham by faith are far more than the children of Abraham through physical lineage. When God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations in **Genesis 17:5**, there was more to the promise than his physical descendants. **Romans 4:15-18** tells us that both Jews and Gentiles who were of the faith of Abraham were also the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

**Galatians 4:28-30** "Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."

Now remember that Isaac was born because of the grace and work of God in the lives of Abraham and Sarah. And we too, are Christians today because we were also born because of the grace and work of God. Abraham and Sarah didn't work in order to earn the fulfilment of the promise and neither can we. Salvation always was and always will be the gift of God through His grace.

Now Abraham didn't doubt that God could fulfil the promise. And despite Sarah being well past the time for childbearing, by faith Abraham trusted in God. Ishmael was the only son of Abraham for fourteen years before Isaac was born. But when Isaac was born, Ishmael had a rival, and went on to persecute Isaac. And because he persecuted Isaac, he limited his own stay in the house of Abraham.

**So, what's Paul's point here?** He's saying that just like Ishmael persecuted Isaac, the same thing was going on in the Galatian church. These Judaizing teachers were persecuting the true sons of Abraham by faith. And because Paul was preaching the truth of the Gospel, he too was being persecuted by those who were of the slave woman.

**So, what's the solution to this persecuting problem in the Galatian church?** Paul uses the Old Testament example of Hagar and her son, 'get rid of them both' he says. **Genesis 21:10** "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

Paul is basically saying that the Galatians need to get rid of those who were sons of legalism and those who were bringing them back into slavery again. These legalisers were trying to bring God's free children under their own legalistic umbrella. They were trying to put demands on Christians which God never demanded. They wanted them to follow commandments which God never commanded. And Paul says, 'get rid of them, they'll just make you slaves again, they'll just bring you under condemnation again'.

And Paul says to us today, remember what I told the church in Rome when they were struggling to understand the law of the Old Testament and the law of Christ. **Romans 8:1+2** "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death."

Paul's conclusion is that we're no longer under slavery, but under the grace of God that brings freedom. No wonder Paul was astonished that they wanted to go back to slavery. No wonder he called them foolish because they were considering going back to a religion which brought death and could ultimately bring an end to their relationship with God.

Now loved ones, legalism was a serious problem back then and it still is today. **Someone once said, 'The problem with legalists is that not enough people have confronted them and told them to get lost. Legalists are dangerous, they are grace-killers, they'll drive off every new Christian you bring to Christ.'**

I've personally witnessed the damage these people cause, they will rip a congregation in two and suck the joy right out of that church. Oh, you can try and reason with them but these people can only see one way and it's their way.

Now earlier Paul challenged them to listen to what the law says and that's what I want us to do just before we finish. Now please don't misunderstand what I've been saying this morning, I'm not saying that Christians are not under law, because we are. Way back in **Jeremiah 31** God told us that He was going to make a new covenant. And He says in **Jeremiah 31:33** "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

**Hebrews 8:6** "But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises." And if you keep on reading you will actually find that the Hebrew writer quotes from **Jeremiah 31:33**.

Paul himself said in **1 Corinthians 9:21** "I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law." In other words, because this new law was brought to us by Jesus, today we're living in and under the law of Christ which is the New Testament. Now this is important for us to understand because when I say I'm free in Christ that doesn't give me a licence to live however I want to or worship Him in any way I want. I'm not free to twist the Scriptures to make them say what I need them to say.

It means I'm not under Old Testament law and I choose to live the way Christ wants me to live, I choose to worship Him the way He wants to be worshipped. And when Paul says in **Galatians 4:31** "Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman." He's telling us that we don't have to be circumcised to be right with God. We don't have to offer animal sacrifices in the temple year in, year out. We're free from the slavery of the Old Testament rules and regulations.

Jesus Himself said in **John 8:31+32** "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Loved ones are you free this morning? Jesus says if you hold on to His teachings, you'll know the truth and since Jesus is Truth, He will set you free.

Let me encourage you not let anyone steal the freedom which Christ gave to you. And if you're not a Christian this morning, please don't leave here today without speaking to someone about you can be set free from all the religious junk you see happening in the world today.