

# The Freedom of Sonship (Galatians 4)

Paul continues with the picture he started in **chapter 3**, of the young man who has stepped into his inheritance and has been released from subjection to a slave . . .

Have you ever been on the flat roof of a house in a busy town or city? From just a few feet up, you get such a lovely bird's-eye view of what is going on around you. I like to think that, as Paul was preparing this letter to the churches in Galatia, he will have been up on the roof one morning (great place for a prayer time – see **Acts 10:9**) and could see the 'school run' taking place in the streets below. All those rich men's sons being taken to school by their slave 'tutors', probably each 'chafing at the bit', wishing that he could get rid of this wretched slave but knowing that he was stuck with him until the day when his father would bring him into full sonship . . .

. . . and the Holy Spirit prompts Paul that this simple picture will help to make the point to those folk in Galatia, will help them to see that they really **have** escaped from the clutches of the Jewish Law, in fact from any – and all – legalism!

**You have come into your inheritance.** (**Galatians 4:1-7**) "Think of that boy", says Paul, "he may be the son and heir and the eventual young master of the household, but right now he is no better than a slave – he's even under a slave! His father's senior household servants and managers can tell him what to do – until that wonderful future day (set by his father) when the tables will be turned and he will be **their** boss!"

"We were the same! Like children, we were held under the elementary rules of the world." I do like the way that Paul includes himself, as a strict follower of the Jewish Law, along with all those Galatian believers who were from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds – they had ALL been under the same basic world-system principles: rules and regulations, expectations and demands that kept them all in bondage! We in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century were exactly the same.

**BUT**, when the right time had come (like the coming-of-age day chosen by the boy's father), God 'sent forth' <sup>1</sup> his Son, who was born into the same world law-system, so that he could 'buy out' <sup>2</sup> all of us who were trapped by it and we could receive that 'coming-of-age' for ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

And the result? God has 'sent forth' (same word) the Spirit of his Son into our hearts and by the Spirit we call out both 'Abba' ('Daddy' – a child's name for their father) and 'Father' (the mature son addressing his father), as Jesus did in Gethsemane (**Mark 14:36**).

<sup>1</sup> 'Sent out on a mission'. Used in these verses (and other places) and by the Lord Jesus in **Luke 24:49**.

<sup>2</sup> 'Redeem', the same word that Paul used back in **Galatians 3:11**, means 'buy out of the market place', like a slave who is bought in the slave market and then given their freedom.

<sup>3</sup> 'Adoption' is completely the wrong word, but we don't really have an English word for this turning point in a young man's life in those days. The Greek word literally means 'placing as a son'.

“Right”, says Paul, “that’s settled, then! You’re not a slave, you’re a son. And as you are a son, then you are also an heir – all through what God has done for you.”

By the way, please don’t get the impression that all this talk of sons and sonship is only for men! At the end of the previous chapter, Paul made that abundantly clear: *“you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:26,28)*. The freedom of sonship is for ALL who have ‘faith in Christ Jesus’.

**So why go back into slavery? (4:8-11)** “That’s where you used to be, slaves to things that are not gods of any sort, when you didn’t know God. (Yes, that applied to those from Jewish backgrounds, too! Look at the prophecy in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**, shown in **Hebrews 8:8-13** as having now been fulfilled!) But now that you have come to know God (though it’s much more that he knows you!), why do you want to turn round and go back into slavery to those basic world-system principles?” They were observing special days and seasons, just like they used to do under the Jewish system or any of the pagan rituals. “Have I wasted all that work that I did with you?” asks Paul.

**Two Types of Messenger. (4:12-20)** We gain a brief glimpse of the way that Paul worked with these folk and elsewhere. He became closely involved! It seems that he was suffering from some physical illness or disability (literally, ‘weakness of the body’) when he first went to Galatia and that they were more than happy to help him in any way that they could. He may have had something wrong with his eyes (4:15). People sometimes say that one of the quickest ways to make friends is to ask someone to help you, and this may have happened here. Anyway, they had given a warm reception to Paul **and** his message, as if he had been an angel – or even Jesus himself!

So what had happened to that blessing and happiness that they had experienced and expressed? Now that Paul is forced to confront them with the truth, have they begun to consider him their enemy? Why is he asking this? Because the believers there have been listening to some other voices: ‘They’ in **4:17**. And what have those other voices been saying?

He doesn’t say exactly, but it is clear from **4:17** what their tactics have been. They have tried to shut out Gentile believers (and probably some from Jewish backgrounds) by saying exactly what had been said in Antioch in **Acts 15:1**: *“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”*. By shutting the door in their faces, these ‘Judaisers’ planned to get the Gentile believers to try to push that door open and become Jewish proselytes – and so make Christianity merely a branch of Judaism, still bound by the Jewish Law and traditions.

“Yes, it’s good to be wanted”, says Paul, “and not just when I am with you! But for good reasons, not bad ones.” (4:18)

When he calls them ‘my children’ in **4:19**, he uses the word that means ‘a born one’. ‘My born ones’ – he sees himself as being their spiritual parent. But he feels like he is going through the pains of childbirth **again**, “until Christ is **formed** in you” – in other words, until they become more like true children who are maturing and becoming like their parents. Through all his letters, we find Paul is always urging his readers to move forwards, to progress and mature in our walk with God, so that we become incrementally changed to be more like the Lord Jesus. <sup>1</sup>

We can really feel his anguish and concern in **4:20**. He would much rather be there and be able to talk with them directly; maybe then he could change his tone and see them liberated and moving forward. Meanwhile, he doesn’t know what to think! The word he uses means ‘not knowing which way to turn’.

Hopefully, the Galatian believers will have seen more of the genuine love and concern that Paul has for them, along with his message of freedom, and will have begun to see the emptiness of the other people’s attempts to get them stuck under rules and regulations . . .

**Abraham’s Offspring – Children of Promise. (4:21-31)** Paul brings another picture, this time from Jewish history and the Old Covenant. Again, he takes them back to Abraham, whom all Jews (including these ‘Judaisers’) venerated as the father of their nation.

Back in **Galatians 3**, he had emphasised Abraham’s **faith** as contrasted to **the Jewish Law**. Now he compares Abraham’s two sons – and their mothers!

First, he challenges them: “If you really want to be back under the Jewish Law, you should at least listen to it!” (The Jews referred to all the 5 books of Moses as ‘The Law’, even though the actual Law does not make an appearance until **Exodus 20**.) Then Paul goes on to bring them an allegory from the life of Abraham and the very beginning of the Jewish nation. Jews were (and still are) proud of being descendants of Isaac, ‘the son according to promise’ whose mother was Sarah – a free woman – and not from the line of Ishmael, whose mother was a slave.

So what Paul goes on to say next would have been surprising and probably shocking to Jewish believers. He equates the Judaism of his time with Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, “bearing children into slavery” (**4:24**) and says that ‘the present Jerusalem’ corresponds to the old covenant from Mount Sinai, “in slavery with her children”. The reference to Sinai being in Arabia (**4:25**) underlines the link to Ishmael, whose descendants “dwelt from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as you go towards Assyria” (**Genesis 25:18**), an area that lies in present-day Saudi Arabia.

These are very strong statements which write off Judaism as being alien to God’s promises and purposes – totally opposite to the understanding that Paul would have had before, as Saul the ‘Pharisee of the Pharisees’! He has come

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<sup>1</sup> For example, **2 Corinthians 3:18**, **Ephesians 4:11-16**, **Colossians 1:28** – and many more!

a long way since those days, but the revelation that he has received gives him the clarity and authority to say this.

He no longer considers Jerusalem as his 'mother', as he used to do when he himself was bound by strict adherence to the Law. Now he looks to 'the Jerusalem above'<sup>1</sup> and compares it/her to Sarah, the **free** woman who was the mother of the son of promise. And he includes all believers (Jewish or Gentile) to be just like Isaac, 'children of promise' (**4:26-28**).

In **4:27**, Paul quotes from **Isaiah 54**, a chapter full of promises to the people of God, which follows on, of course, from the well-known Messianic prophecy of **Isaiah 53**. Like the people to whom Isaiah originally spoke this prophecy, the believers in the Galatian churches may have felt that they were a vulnerable minority, especially when compared to the large, thriving and apparently fruitful Jewish nation. Paul uses the encouragement of Isaiah's words to reassure them that they are right in the centre of God's plans and purposes. Check out more of the promises in **Isaiah 54** for yourself!

Just as Ishmael (aged 14+) mocked his infant half-brother Isaac (**Genesis 21:9**), so, says Paul, those who are the present-day equivalent of the one 'who was born according to the flesh' are persecuting those who are born 'according to the Spirit'. Hence the hard time that the 'Judaisers' are giving to the Galatian believers (**4:29**).

Paul really doesn't mince his words here! In equating Judaism with Hagar and Ishmael and identifying those with faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the true children of promise like Isaac, he goes on to quote **Genesis 21:10 & 12**, which says that the son of the slave should be ejected and not share in the inheritance with the son of promise (**4:30**).

The Judaisers had tried to shut out the Gentile believers in order to try to get them to embrace Judaism. Now Paul is saying that it is they who are shut out and will miss out on the inheritance of the children of promise! **We believers**, says Paul, **are now the true heirs of Abraham** and the promises which God made to him, "not children of a bondwoman but of the free woman." (**4:31**) The tables are completely turned!

Dave Taylor April 2023

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You will find more in this short series about Paul, his background and ministry in Galatia, in 'Paul – A Man Prepared', 'Paul in Galatia', 'The Message and the Messenger (Galatians 1 & 2)' and 'Following Rules Doesn't Work (Galatians 3)' all from [www.justonecandle.uk](http://www.justonecandle.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> See **Hebrews 12:22, 11:16, 13:14, Revelation 3:12, 21:2 & 10**