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# Sons or Slaves?

*A Study of the Epistle of Galatians*

**Galatians 4:1-20**

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So let's imagine all you had ever known was slavery. You're standing on the slave box to be sold yet again when a wealthy benefactor purchases you, redeems you, not just to set you free but, much to your surprise, actually makes you his child and makes you an heir of the family fortune. It's everything you could have ever imagined. If that was offered to you, why would you ever choose to become a slave again? That's the question Paul asks us and that we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Galatians, Chapter 4.

Last week we were reminded that God made a promise to Abraham. Four hundred and thirty years later He brought Moses and the Law to remind us how much we need the promise. Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the promise, and He offers you the gift of salvation, redemption, forgiveness, new life in Christ, heir to the family fortune today freely as a gift. We pick it up then: Chapter 4, verse 1:

> **Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything,** (*NASB, Galatians 4:1)

Now to understand the illustration, you have to understand in the first century world there was a dramatic distinction between a child and an adult. There was a moment, literally a moment, a day when you were declared to go from childhood to adulthood, usually celebrated in some way. As a child you had no freedom. As a child you had no voice. As a child you basically had no rights, so what he is saying is: in terms of your position, it's very much like a slave. The comparison between a slave and a child was very obvious in the first century world. Verse 2:

> **...but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also...**so he's telling us this is an illustration...**So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.** (Vs. 2-3)

Now who is the **we**? Because how you define **we** determines what the **elemental things** are. Some would say it's just the Jews, but that doesn't really make sense. Paul is talking to the Galatians who are Gentiles, so I think it's a reference to **we**—the Jews and the Gentiles—who we are as *believers*, and at one time we were in bondage to **the elemental things of the world**. The word **elemental** basically just means the *basics, the ABC's of the world*. He's talking about the religious stuff that they were involved in.

Everything in the world is performance-based. Every religion of the world is performance-based. Christianity is the only exception to that. Basically it's because these are the basics; these are the ABC's of life. I do something good; I'm rewarded for that. I do something naughty; I'm punished for that. That's the ABC's. That's how everything works, so that's how religion works. The problem is it's always a system that leaves us in bondage. I never know when I'm good enough. How good is good enough, and even if I was good today, what about yesterday and what about tomorrow? There's never peace. There's never rest. There's never joy. It's a system that always produces bondage, so he reminds them of that. When they were children spiritually, they were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.

> **But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law,** (Vs. 4)

Now we're headed towards the Christmas season, and always at Christmas people like to pull out Isaiah chapter 9, verse 6: "For unto us a child is born," (that's humanity)**; "**unto us a son is given," (that's deity). It's the fulfillment of the promise made all the way back in Genesis chapter 15.

It's the exact same thing here. You have a Son who is given (deity), a child who is born of a woman (humanity) under the Law, which is the reminder that Jesus was born under the Law, but when Jesus compared Himself to the Law, He compared perfectly. The Law revealed Jesus to be perfectly righteous, which made Him then eligible to die for our sins. Verse 5: Why?

> **...so that He might redeem those who were under the Law...**in other words, in bondage...**that we might receive the adoption as sons.**

Why did God send His Son born of a woman, the fulfillment of the promise? Answer: That we might be redeemed. We were in slavery to our sins. We are in slavery under the Law. The word **redeem** was a term that they would have clearly connected with the slave market. It meant to *purchase a slave, to buy the slave and either possess him or to set him free.* We were redeemed from our slavery in order that, what? Not just that we would be set free but that we would actually be adopted as sons.

Now the idea is this: It's not that you're sons and daughters. Sometimes in our politically correct world we want to correct all that, but the gender reference has nothing to do with your gender. It has everything to do with the fact that in a first century world only sons were eligible for the inheritance. Therefore, regardless of your gender, you're a son. That's your status, which means you are legally eligible for the family fortune.

Now this is an amazing thing. God didn't just give you a ticket to heaven. God actually adopted you as His son, to make you a legal heir of the family fortune—the fulfillment of the promise that He had made to Abraham. It would be theologically correct to say that you are born into the family of God—born again—a new creation in Christ, but you were adopted into the inheritance. Adoption is always a reference to your status, making you a legal heir of the family fortune, of all that God offers. Verse 6:

> **Because you are sons**...what's the result or the benefit of that? **Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"**

Now that's a remarkable verse. Basically what it's saying is this: As a result of being declared a son, meaning a legal heir of the inheritance, part of the inheritance is that you actually receive the presence of God in your heart. Now over the years there's always been debate about what's the exact right language to use when talking about people trusting Christ as Savior, and one of the things people often say is, "You shouldn't use the language, 'invite Jesus into your heart,'" but that is exactly the language that Paul is using here. He is saying that when you trust Christ as Savior, you are declared to be a son, and as a son you are a legal heir, and part of the inheritance is you actually get the very presence of the Son Himself in your heart with the result being that you cry out, **"Abba! Father!"** which is a term of intimacy. It means you say to God, "*Daddy*!" or "*Papa!"*

Now this was unheard of in the ancient world. There was no religion that proposed the idea that you could have some sort of a personal, intimate relationship with God. As a matter of fact, there is no world religion today that proposes that other than Christianity. Think about this just from a Jewish perspective. God dwelt in the Holy of Holies, separated by the veil, and only the high priest went in, and only one time a year. There was this real sense of separation from God. But when Jesus died on the cross, the veil was torn because the work of salvation had been completed. So the idea of going from the Holy of Holies to a relationship that has now become so personal and so intimate with God that it actually is like calling God "Daddy"; it's a remarkable concept. But this is not just, "Here's your ticket to heaven and good luck cultivating an intimate relationship with God," as if it's like *Where's Waldo*? You know, "Where's God? I'm trying to find Him. He's out there. I have my ticket. I'm not sure where He is." It's far more than that. It is actually a supernatural intimacy.

Think of it this way: For all eternity God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit dwelt in relationship with Himself. It's the very essence of life. It's what we mean by eternal life. It's the Father, Son, and Spirit in the fullness of all that defines life. It's everything that our soul longs for. The very essence of the gospel is an invitation into that life to join the circle, to give our souls what our souls long for, but God doesn't just give us a ticket and an invitation. He actually gives us a member of the Trinity to dwell in our hearts to supernaturally connect us with God, to supernaturally make it possible that we would actually have this personal, intimate, Daddy kind of relationship with the God of the universe. What he says there is absolutely remarkable! Verse 7:

> **Therefore...**as a result of that...**you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.**

You are not just someone who has been given a ticket to heaven. You are no longer a slave. You are actually a son, and as a son you are eligible to be an heir to the family fortune, all that God promised Abraham, all that God promises freely offered to anyone who will choose to receive it by faith. How does it happen? The end of verse 7: **through God.** It's not on the basis of performance. It's not on the basis of religion. It's not on the basis of how good you were this week. It's on the basis of what God has done for you—all this freely offered as a gift of His grace. It's promise, not performance.

What he says in verses 1 through 7 is really remarkable. I don't know how it could get better than that. It's tempting to just say, "That is an awesome passage. Hallelujah! Praise Jesus! Have a nice day!" but what's the first word in verse 8? **However.** Uh oh!

> **However...**there's a problem here...**at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.**

The word **know** there is the Greek word that means *know intimately.* It's the term used to describe sexual relations between a husband and a wife. It's a very intimate relationship of knowing God. He says, "Before you knew God, **you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods**." Now that's a very politically incorrect statement to make. In a world that believes all roads lead to God and all religions are equally valid and you just make up your own god, what Paul is saying is, "That doesn't work! You can worship a god of stone. You can worship a god of wood. You can worship a god that dwells in a temple but, at the end of the day, it's no god if it isn't *the* God. All religions are not equally valid. Either it's God or it's not. You can spend your whole life saying that that rock is a god but, at the end of the day, it's not a god. It's a rock. It has no personality. It has no power. It has no hope. It has no way to set you free. It's a rock. The Galatians were up to their eyebrows in pagan

religion but, at the end of the day, the pagan religion had no capacity to set them free. That's what he's saying. They were **by nature no gods**. It was nothing. Verse 9:

> **But now...**everything's changed...**But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.** (Vs. 9-11)

So **now that you have come to know God, or rather that God knows you**...think of it this way. We could gather today and say that we **know God**, meaning we know *about* God, kind of like God's a celebrity and we know Him, but it's a radically different statement to say but *that God knows me*. He knows *me*! He knows me intimately. He actually dwells within me. That's part of my inheritance, that He has actually given me a member of the Trinity in my heart to supernaturally connect me with Himself, to experience the life that He's offered, so now that He actually knows me and I have been made a son and that's my inheritance, why would I willingly choose to enslave myself again to the elemental things of the world? In other words: why would I go back to cold, dead religion? Why would I go back to the stuff that could never deliver the goods in the first place? Why would I put myself back in bondage?

When he talks about **days and weeks and seasons**, he could be talking about the Jewish idea of that which would be Sabbath and the Feasts and all of those activities, but it could also be one of the Greek religions. Almost all religions have their days; they have their weeks; they have their seasons; they have their religious activities. That's in essence what he's saying. Before you knew God, you were up to your eyebrows in all this religious stuff, and it didn't do a thing for you. Now you have this unimaginable intimate relationship with God, and you're going back to that stuff. You're going back to the requirement of these days and weeks and rituals and obligations and religious stuff that, at the end of the day, does nothing for you, and he wonders if they are ever going to get it.

Now I want to wrestle with that question. Why do we do that? In the Greek when he says, "How is it that you do that?" it sounds fairly mild, but the Greek is actually very expressive. I think in our language today it would be, "Why in the world do we do this?" but before we wrestle with the question, I want to read the rest of the section because it gives you a little bit of Paul's heartbeat before we talk about that. Verse 12:

> **I beg of you, brethren, become as I *am*, for I also *have become* as you are. You have done me no wrong;**

I think what he's saying there is: when Paul, as a Jewish believer, arrived in Galatia he didn't arrive with bags full of religious, legalistic stuff that would have separated him as a Jew from them as Gentiles. Just the opposite. He actually says it in Corinthians, "To the Greeks I became a Greek." In other words, "I didn't carry all this religious baggage. I didn't need this baggage. On the basis of grace, we come together to be one people." That's one of the remarkable features of grace: no matter who you are, no matter where you're from, no matter what you've done, no matter what's been done to you, we come together as one people in grace, and he is reminding them of the wonderful relationship they had.

> **...but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*. Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?** (Vs. 13-16)

Paul remembers that when he was with them he apparently had some sort of a disease, and they loved him and they had compassion on him and they cared for him, and they developed this beautiful, intimate relationship around the gospel of grace, but now he feels the tension. They are turning on him. They are becoming enemies, which is helpful to remind ourselves that this is what legalism does to us. There are far too many Christians that think legalism is conservative. Legalism is harmless. It's not harmless. It's toxic! It destroys churches. It destroys families. It destroys relationships. That's the very nature of it. It's always critical. It's always destroying relationships. That's what legalism is, and that's what he's saying. "Man, this has messed us up, and now I'm trying to tell you the truth, and now that's made me an enemy?" Verse 17:

> **They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out...**throw you in jail. We saw that term last week...**so that you will seek them.**

Verse 17 is a very interesting verse. This is the very nature of legalism. We've said it before. The very essence of legalism is it's about power and control. It's about the legalists wanting to control you, having power over you, telling you how to live your life in God, and that enslaves you. It throws you back in jail. It's very interesting that he says you end up serving ***them*.** You end up not serving God. You end up serving the legalist. No matter how many times the legalist uses the name of Jesus, at the end of the day, in a system of legalism, Jesus is put in the background and the legalist is put front and center. And it's always about: what does the legalist say? What are the rules? What am I supposed to do? I don't want the legalist pointing at me. I don't want him judging me. I don't want him condemning me, and so I am always trying to please the legalist, and pretty soon my life is in bondage to the legalist, and Jesus has faded into the background, and that's exactly what he's saying. Verse 18:

> **But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you. My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you—but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.** (Vs. 18-20)

Paul says, "I do seek after you but in a commendable way." He's like a mother in labor for her child. He's feeling the pain and the agony to try to give birth to this child, that this child might experience new life in Christ **until Christ be formed in you**. So he feels the pain and the strain and the struggle, wanting them to know the life which will set them free. A lot of scholars would say that this section that we just read is the most impassioned appeal that Paul makes to anyone in all of his letters. He has laid it out there. He fears for these people, that they are not going to find the freedom and the life in Christ that is their inheritance on the basis of grace.

In the spirit of the text, I want to give it my best shot to appeal to you to understand what he's saying, that we might get this, that we might live in the freedom of God's grace. The very first week that we started the Galatians series, we used the picture that grace is really about the freedom to celebrate and to dance with Jesus to the music of *Amazing Grace*, but I followed with this

statement, "Some of you, if you were to be honest, would have to say it's been a long time since you danced with Jesus. Your theme song has become *Ordinary Grace*." Why is that...why is that? What happens to us along the way that we're willing to settle for so much less?

I want to try to illustrate it by illustrating it with a marriage. Patty and I have been married for thirty-two years. Thirty-two years ago, I was crazy in love. I didn't need someone to tell me that I need to spend time with Patty. I didn't need to go to a dating conference to say that I need to make time for her, that I need to value her, that I need to serve her, that I need to be faithful to her. I didn't have to try to work her into my schedule. I didn't have to create a dating night. I couldn't get enough of this woman. She lived basically down here at 48th and Highway 2. I lived right down by Lincoln High. My only mode of transportation was a motorcycle; I was a poor college student. Even in the dead of winter, as long as there wasn't ice on the road, I would put coveralls on; I would put boots on; I would put a scarf on; I would put mittens on, and I would ride my motorcycle and nearly freeze to death every evening just to see this woman.

Nobody had to tell me to do that in a workshop. I didn't have accountability partners saying, "That's probably something you need to do if you're going to get together with this woman." It was in my heart. I loved her. I didn't see it as a sacrifice. It was a means to an end, and I couldn't spend enough time with her but, as the years pass and children come and life takes over, sometimes the passion begins to cool off, and when the passion cools off, the rules and the external management systems to compensate for what's not in my heart anymore, begin to heat up. It always works that way. Once the passion is no longer in my heart, I need external management systems to convince me to do what I was doing before, so I have to read books. I have to go to marriage seminars. I need accountability partners to somehow externally make this happen. I need to create a date night. I need to work her into my schedule. I need to love her. I need to value her. I need to serve her. I need to take care of her. I should be faithful to her, so I'd better have a lot of accountability, and I'd better not watch things I shouldn't on the internet, so I have lots of accountability. Why? Because it's not in my heart anymore, so I am externally trying to manufacture it to compensate for that.

That is exactly what happens in our relationship with Jesus. At one time we were two young lovers, amazed by this thing called grace—that God would take me from where I was and what I had done and that He would save me and that He would make me His child and that He would make me heir to the family fortune and He would celebrate me and He would dance over me and He would cheerlead me. And it was awesome and we used to dance to the music of *Amazing Grace*, and I couldn't get enough of that, but somewhere along the way, the passion began to cool off and, as the passion cools off, the rules heat up. It always works that way. When the passion cools off and it's not in my heart anymore, then I have to find external management systems to make it happen, so now I have all these external religious systems to get me to do what I should do. Now it's become a duty. Now it's an obligation. Now it's what I should do because I have a ticket to heaven. Now I have the legalist telling me what to do and how to love and to externally try to compensate for what isn't in my heart anymore. As soon as the passion for Jesus begins to cool off, I am extraordinarily vulnerable to the legalist, and over time that's what happens. But here's the deal. It doesn't have to be that way...it doesn't have to be that way!

Patty and I have been married for thirty-two years. I am crazy in love with this woman. I have that passion in my heart. I love her; I don't need to go to a marriage seminar to tell me to spend time with her. I don't need to squeeze her into my schedule. I can't get enough of this woman. She's in my heart; she's my priority. I love her. I love to love her. I love to serve her. I love to do things with her. I don't need accountability partners constantly telling me to be faithful to her. I don't need them

constantly telling me I shouldn't be looking at things on the internet I shouldn't be looking at. I don't do those things, and the reason is because I don't want to. I don't want to flirt with other women. I don't want somebody else. I don't want to look at images on the screen. I just don't want to because I'm crazy in love with this woman. I don't need some sort of external system to manage that for me. It's in my heart, and that's what motivates me, and that's what makes it powerful.

In the same way, I am more passionately in love with Jesus today than I have ever been. I am more amazed at His grace—that He would want me, that He would love me, that He would know me, that He would save me. In my heart I desire to do the right thing. I want to walk uprightly; I want to do righteous things; I want to walk in obedience. I want to live for the things that matter. That's what's in me—that's the longing of my heart. That's what motivates me and, because of that I don't need a bunch of religious external stuff trying to compensate for what is in my heart. I don't need a bunch of religious stuff to make me do the right thing. I don't need a bunch of religious stuff to make me live for what matters. I don't need all kinds of systems of accountability to walk uprightly. It's what I want to do. It's the passion of my heart.

So this is what you must understand. If, over the years, the passion has cooled off, I guarantee you the religious stuff has heated up. The way back is not to try to dismantle all the external stuff. It's to focus your attention once again on cultivating an intimate, passionate love affair with Jesus, to be reminded again what is true and who you are in Christ and what He's done for you and your hope and your future, and what matters is to understand again: this is what your soul longs for. This is what your soul wants. This is where life is found and, as you cultivate that passion again, trust me, the external stuff will take care of itself. It will dissipate. It will go away because now you're again driven by what's in your heart and the passion that is powerful. You have this supernatural capacity to experience an intimate relationship with the God of the universe.

If today you were to say, "You know, I have to be honest. That relationship with Jesus isn't much of a love affair anymore. It's mostly duty and obligation," I can assure you this. It wasn't Jesus that moved away. It wasn't Jesus that shut it down. It isn't Jesus that doesn't want it, which leaves one option. *You* didn't want it! I can't imagine as a husband what it would be like to be so passionately in love with a woman who doesn't love me back. Some of you know that pain, and it's got to be unimaginably painful, but I do believe that's how God feels when He did everything. He made a promise. He sent His Son. He sacrificed His Son. He put His Spirit in your heart. He did everything to make it possible, and you just don't want it. I can't imagine how that breaks His heart, and I would assure you this morning that if you listen quietly in your heart, you hear the voice of the Spirit as a lover calling you to come home, calling you to come home and dance with Him again as two young lovers to the beautiful music of amazing, *Amazing Grace*.

> *Our Father, we are thankful that this is true. God, I've preached it a hundred times, and it still seems so hard to imagine that this could be so, that the God of the universe would long to dance with me, to celebrate me today. God, remind us anew and afresh of this amazing grace that we might again light the fire of passion in our hearts for the One who gave up His own Son to make it possible. God, this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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# Study Questions
# Sons or Slaves?

*A Study in the Epistle of Galatians*

**Galatians 4:1-20**

## Opening Discussion

1. What is the difference between approaching God on the basis of promise or on the basis of performance?

2. What effect do these two choices have on our Christian walk?

3. How would you describe your Christian life today? Is it driven more by passion or by religious obligation?

## Bible Study

1. Read Galatians 4:1-7. What kept us in bondage as slaves before Christ? What are the elemental things of the world?

2. What did God do to set us free from our bondage? What are the results?

3. Therefore, according to 4:7 who are you and on what basis is this true?

4. Read Galatians 4:8-11. What is Paul saying in 4:8? What is Paul saying about religion in our world today? How does religion enslave?

5. In 4:9 Paul states "but now". What has changed and what is the result?

6. Paul is astonished that the Galatians would go back to slavery after experiencing Christ. Why do we do that? Why do we tend to return to what looks more like cold dead religion than what seems like a supernatural intimate love relationship?

7. Read Galatians 4:12-20. What does legalism do to our relationships with other believers? What do the legalists do according to 4:17? Do you end up serving Christ or the legalists? Have you experienced this?

8. What does Paul mean in 4:19 by the phrase "until Christ is formed in you"?

## Application

1. According to this text what specifically has God done for you? What is His offer?

2. Are you currently living your Christian life as a son or a slave? Is your Christian life defined more by an internal passionate love relationship with Christ or an external standard motivated by some sense of obligation to God for saving you?

3. What are some practical ways you can rekindle a passionate love affair with Christ that will drive your Christian walk from the inside out?


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