

FROM SONSHIP TO SLAVERY  
PART 1

TEXT: GALATIANS 4:8-11

February 13, 2011

**INTRODUCTION:**

Nothing brings greater joy to the heart of a pastor than to see those who are members of the churches under his oversight eagerly receiving the gospel and then seeking to conduct their lives in step with the truth of the gospel. In 3 John 4, the apostle John writes, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

On the other hand, few things are more distressing and painful than to see professing believers (who are your spiritual children, Gal. 4:19) no longer eager to hear the gospel (4:16) or desiring to walk in light of it (4:11; cf. 2:14). Such is the situation Paul was facing in the churches of Galatia.

As Paul assessed the dire situation in Galatia, he expresses fear that his gospel ministry may have been in vain (4:11). J.B. Phillips paraphrases v. 11, "You make me wonder if all my efforts over you have been wasted!"

These words of Paul are deeply emotional. Paul had given, life-threatening, sacrificial service on behalf of the Galatians in order to bring them the gospel. During his first missionary journey, Luke, in Acts 14:19, records that when Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra (a city in the province of Galatia) preaching the gospel, "Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead."

And now, after such sacrificial service Paul is lamenting that all of his labors may have been for nothing if the Galatians return to their slavery under the Law. So, vv. 8-11 (see also 12-20), reminds us once again of the occasion for why Paul wrote this letter.

From Slavery to Sonship was the message of 4:1-7 (as well as the message of Galatians). Now, From Sonship to Slavery is the message of 4:1-8. Paul is grieved that the Galatians desired (4:9) to turn back to the observance of the Law (i.e., Mosaic Covenant, v. 9c) and were thus on the verge of total apostasy (1:6).

The essence of Paul's message here is: Once you were slaves. Now you are sons. How then can you turn back and desire to be slaves again?

Taking into consideration Paul's arguments beginning in chapter three, we can begin to see the reason for his fear. Paul is asking the Galatians,

If you have received the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham (3:7-9);

If you are no longer under the curse of God's law (3:10);

If you are no longer held captive as a prisoner under the law (3:23);

If you are no longer under the harsh discipline of a pedagogue (3:25);

If you are no longer a minor devoid of all inheritance rights (4:1-3);

If you are no longer enslaved to the elementary principles of the world (4:3);

If you have been redeemed by the Son and adopted by the Father (4:5);

If you have received the Holy Spirit who confirms God the Father's love and acceptance of you (4:6);

If you are now an heir of God's estate, why would you want to return to your orphanage (4:6-7);

How can you go back? How could you desire to enslave yourselves again? Why would you trade grace for law and freedom for bondage?

Paul is nearly at a loss for words (4:20, ἀποροῦμαι, "perplexed") and fears that the Galatians may never have been justified, as evidenced by their desire (θέλετε, v. 9) to follow the religious observances of the Mosaic Covenant as a means for justification. Such a going back was totally unthinkable to Paul.

Therefore, in order to keep the Galatians from falling from sonship to slavery, Paul sets forth 3 aspects of the Galatians' relationship to God that he wants them to remember to show the foolishness of turning back to the law.

#### **LESSON:**

##### **I. PAUL REMINDS THE GALATIANS OF WHO THEY WERE: IGNORANT OF GOD, v. 8**

In vv. 8-9, Paul draws a sharp contrast between who the Galatians were and what they have become in relation to their knowledge of God in order to highlight the folly of returning to the Law for justification.

First, Paul characterizes the Galatians former relationship to God one of ignorance. He writes, "Formerly, *when you did not know God*, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods" (emphasis mine).

Before their conversion, the Galatians did not possess a saving knowledge of God. Specifically, they did not know God as Trinity (vv. 4-6). In 4:4-6, Paul clearly presents the work of salvation as originating with God the Father and then carried out in the Son and applied through the Holy Spirit.

However, before their conversion, the Galatians didn't know that God the Father longs to have a relationship with sinners. They didn't know that the Father took the initiative and sent His One and only Unique Son to be born of a woman (took on flesh), born under the law (gave the obedience we owe to God) in order to die on the cross to redeem man from his slavery so man could receive adoption as sons. They didn't know that through God the Holy Spirit the Father's initiative in sending His Son is finally applied and confirmed.

Because the Galatians were ignorant of this saving knowledge of God, Paul says they were "enslaved to those that by nature are not gods." A lack of a saving knowledge of God results in slavery/bondage.

Notice the nature of the Galatians slavery. Their slavery consisted in the worship of false gods (i.e., idolatry). Paul doesn't mention the exact false gods the Galatians worshipped.

We know that they worshipped pagan gods and goddesses. For example, Paul and Barnabas had personally experienced and confronted the idolatrous worship in the Galatian city of Lystra, where there was a temple to Zeus (Acts 14:11-18). In Iconium, the mother goddess Zizimene was worshipped. Also, people throughout Galatia belonged to the Roman Imperial cult (Emperor worship). Some may have been involved in the worship of the pagan deities of Greece and others perhaps were devoted to astrology.

Whatever the particular religion was, the important point to note is that ignorance of a saving knowledge of God results in an enslaving idolatry.

Notice that Paul says these so-called "gods" were in reality "no gods" (cf. Ps. 115:4-7; 1 Cor. 8:4-6). Behind all idols are demonic spirits (1 Cor. 10:20). Being ignorant of God, the Galatians were in bondage to evil spirits. Martin Luther once said, "Any god apart from Jesus Christ is the devil."

Mark this: There is nothing more intolerable to satan and demonic spirits than a person coming to a true knowledge of God in Christ. And so the devil's chief purpose/strategy is to deceive people into worshipping false gods (idols) in order to lead them away from a saving knowledge of Christ and grace and thereby bring them into slavery and bondage.

There is another very important spiritual principle here that we must not overlook, which is: *Whatever we worship, to that we are enslaved.*

We are all born to worship something. Tom Schreiner writes, "...those who do not know God give worship to someone or something else instead of to the one and only true God" (*Galatians*, p. 277). Until a person comes to a saving knowledge of God through the gospel, he or she will always be enslaved to idols. But, once a person comes into a saving knowledge of Christ, slowly but surely the idols of one's heart are torn down.

Admittedly, identifying our idols can be difficult. Idolatry comes in many different forms.

It may be in more obvious forms such as the worship of Greek gods like the Galatians, Tribal-Ancestry Worship, Voodoo, Hinduism, Buddhism, praying to “saints” or the veneration of icons.

Or, idolatry may be in less obvious (but equally enslaving) forms such as success, careers, fame, wealth, romance, family, children, sports, social status, political affiliation, political/moral/social causes, philanthropy, pastors looking to be hit the “conference speaking circuit,” bloggers daily checking the number of blog hits they get, the idol of relevance, beauty, fitness, pride in being gospel-centered, sexual sin, etc...

I want to briefly mention two idols that are abundantly prevalent in our culture. Turn to Romans 1. Romans 1 is the classic text in the New Testament on idolatry. In vv. 26-28, Paul shows that sexual sin is idolatry and results from not knowing God (v. 25). What does this idol look like? Tim Keller writes that girlfriends and boyfriends who are sleeping together are committing idolatry because they are looking to romance to give them everything that they should be looking for in God (<http://www.monergism.com/postmodernidols.html>).

A second idol that is quite prevalent in our immediate beach culture is what I call “life’s a beach” mentality. Those who live according to this philosophy of life just want to kick back, take it easy, not commit to anything and not submit to authority. They just want to hang out and live for the moment.

Ultimately, this is nothing more than the fallen human heart desiring to control one’s own life, which is idolatry. “Life’s a beach” philosophy is idolatry because a person is looking to self-independence to give them everything that they should be looking for in dependence upon God.

How do we know if something has become an idol in our life? Tim Keller suggests the following: “An idol is anything in your life that is so central to your life that you can’t have a meaningful life if you lose it” (<http://www.monergism.com/postmodernidols.html>).

Any time we devote ourselves to anyone or anything instead of God alone, we are guilty of idolatry (breaking the first two commandments) and thus give evidence that we do not know God. Martin Luther writes, “Whoever falls from the doctrine of justification is ignorant of God and is an idolater” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, p. 395).

Idolatry is self-justification because it is looking to someone or something to give you only what God can give you. This is why the apostle John warns in 1 John 5:21, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

But, unlike God, idols promise but cannot deliver. This is why Paul describes idols as “those that by nature are not gods.” The idols that we give ourselves to ultimately have no power to deliver on their promises.

Listen to Psalm 115:4-8:

“<sup>4</sup> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. <sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. <sup>6</sup> They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. <sup>7</sup> They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. <sup>8</sup> Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.”

Note carefully v. 8. *We become like what we worship.* For example, if we worship money, we become selfish and greedy. But, if we worship Christ as He is revealed to us in the gospel, we become like Him. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another...” The remedy for idolatry is an unremitting immersion in the truths of the gospel.

When we seek for justification through our idols they only lead us into condemnation. In the end, the idols we give ourselves to enslave us rather than free us. Such was the former condition of the Galatians.

#### **REFLECTION:**

How then do we avoid the Galatians’ folly? How do we avoid turning from sonship back into slavery?

First, Paul says we must remember who we were: ignorant of God (i.e., enslaved idolaters).

This reminds me of the movie *Ben Hur*. At one point in the movie, Ben Hur is captured by the Romans and made a slave. He was condemned to row in the bottom of a Roman war ship. He had a large shackle placed around his ankle to remind him of his status as a slave.

During battle, the Roman soldiers would take large chains and wind them through the ankle shackles and bind the slaves to the boat. So, if the boat sank during the battle, the slaves went down with the ship and were certain to die in their chains.

However, in one scene, Ben Hur escapes from His shackles and goes into battle and rescues the top Roman General. They end up stranded in the ocean for days and during this time, the general only refers to Ben Hur as slave #49.

But, when the general and Ben Hur are rescued by Rome, the general takes the ankle shackle off of Ben Hur and places his signet ring on his finger. He gives him a robe and calls him his very own son and makes him heir of everything he has. He also throws a great feast and celebration for his new son.

This is what our heavenly Father has done for us! We were once slave #49, chained to our idols floating in the sea of condemnation awaiting our death. But, God the Father,

because of His great love, sent His Son to redeem us so that we might receive adoption as sons and be made heirs of everything He has!

Now, we would think that it is crazy for Ben Hur to desire to return to his shackles in the bottom of a boat, which represented only bondage and death. Thus, Paul is perplexed as to why the Galatians who have been delivered from one type enslaving idolatry (paganism) would desire to become enslaved to another (Judaism)!

Here in v. 8 we see how easy it is to turn from the gospel and revert back to the Law. There is in the heart of every man an unceasing temptation to revert back to self-justification (idolatry). So, we must constantly be reminded that there is no saving/justifying knowledge of God outside of Christ.

In Acts 4:12, Peter declared, “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” God can only be known through Christ (Jn. 1:18, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, He has made Him known.”). Christ alone is the only way to truly know God (Jn. 17:3, “this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”). Faith in Christ alone is the only way to be justified, redeemed and receive adoption as sons.

Paul thus shows that the fundamental problem with man is his ignorance of a saving knowledge of God, which comes through the gospel. Apart from this saving knowledge of God, one’s life only results in slavery and death. Therefore, to keep us from falling from slavery to sonship, Paul calls us first to remember who we once were (i.e., ignorant of God). We must frequently remind ourselves of who we once were and by God’s grace determine to never go back.

© John Fonville

Permissions: Permission is happily granted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not revise the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on Paramount's website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by John Fonville.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Fonville.