

Galatians 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba Father. So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather, to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain. Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

[1 : 1 2] You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first. And though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

[2 : 1 8] Now this may be interpreted allegorically. These women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. She is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia.

She corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear.

Break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labour. For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband. Now you brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the spirit, so also it is now. But what does the scripture say?

Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman. So brothers, we are not children of the slave, but of the free woman.

[3 : 19] Paul has just described the way in which the law served as a guardian, indeed as a jailer, until Christ came. And now in chapter 4 he develops that image further. Verses 1 to 7 of this chapter are largely a recapitulation of the verses that precede them in chapter 3 verses 23 to 29.

Now before faith came we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

It can be illuminating to read these verses alongside chapter 4 verses 1 to 7 and see the parallels between statements such as but now that faith has come and but when the fullness of time had come.

[4 : 26] There are also parallels between verses 3 to 6 of chapter 4 and chapter 3 verses 13 to 14. Paul gives the illustration of a child who is the heir of a great estate.

As long as the child is a minor though, he does not have the management of the estate and can himself be under the supervision of the stewards of his father's estate. This period of subjection involves being under sin in verse 22 of chapter 3, under the law in verse 23 of chapter 3 and enslaved to the elementary principles of the world verse 3 of this chapter.

What the elementary principles of the world are is much debated. Some have argued that they are rudimentary principles or basic teachings. Others that they are elemental spirits.

However, I think the strongest case is that they refer to the physical elements. Another reference to these elements is found in Colossians chapter 2 verse 8 and 16 to 23.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

[5 : 35] Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the head, from which the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used, according to human precepts and teachings?

These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

In Colossians chapter 2, as in verses 8 to 10 of this chapter, the elementary principles seem to refer to the physical cosmos. Old covenant religion was religion ruled by, ordered around and focused upon physical elements, upon times and seasons, upon matters of diet, upon various physical rituals such as circumcision and the various sacrifices, etc.

[6 : 59] These things are not bad in themselves, and properly used, some things like them can still have a place in worship and broader Christian practice. However, they represent a religion under the rule of the natural elements of the physical world, composed of sacrifice, principles of clean and unclean, and calendrical feasts.

In this respect, faithful Jewish religion had a great deal in common with the religion of the pagans. This was religion in the flesh, religion under the guardianship of fleshly elements.

Israel had to relate to God in terms of physical sacrifices of specific animals, in terms of physical building and its furniture, and the like. This system, constructed of the elementary principles, guarded and guided Israel in its childhood.

However, in the new covenant, there is a move from the shadowy elements to the substance, which is Christ. We don't come under the rule of a physical temple, but we relate to the body of Christ.

We don't have the same physical sacrifices that we perform, but we perform spiritual sacrifices on the basis of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Our worship still involves symbolic mediation, where physical elements can function as effective symbols of the spiritual acts we are performing.

[8 : 15] But we no longer act in terms of symbolic intermediation, where physical elements stand in the place of the spiritual realities, so that we relate to the physical elements rather than to the spiritual realities more directly.

When the fullness of time came, God sent his Son. The Son is born of a woman. He is human. He is born as a human being of a human being. He is also the seed of the woman, promised way back in Genesis chapter 3.15.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. He is born under the law, born under the old order of the elementary principles, within the sacrificial system, the dietary laws, circumcision, the temple, etc.

He redeems those under the law, delivering them from slavery to the guardianship of the law, so that they can enjoy the status and privilege of full sons entering into their inheritance.

Just as God sent the Son, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, so that we might relate to him as full sons and heirs. The period of supervision by the elementary principles was temporary.

[9 : 25] It ended when the time came for the child to enter into the inheritance. For Gentiles, the situation was different. They too were under the elementary principles, also functioning within societies subordinated to physical and cosmic principles in their sacrificial systems, with their idols, their temples, and all these other things.

But they were not as those set apart as the appointed heirs. The way that Paul aligns the status of Gentiles and the status of old covenant Jews, both being under the elementary principles of the world, really should be startling to us.

It would have been to his first readers. Paul is shocked that the Galatian Christians, having been delivered from their subjection to the elements as Gentiles and brought into the freedom of sonship in Christ, would turn back to the subjection to those elements characteristic of Jews.

This is like the son who is no longer a minor, but the heir of all, going back to the stewards as if they were his masters. Or perhaps, to be more precise, it's like someone who's been adopted into a family and given the right to enjoy the full run of the inheritance, seeking to come under the rule of stewards that had ruled his fellow heirs before they had entered into their majority.

While the heir is privileged, even when he hasn't entered into the inheritance, if he turns back from entering into his inheritance and continues to subject himself to the guardians, that privilege becomes meaningless.

[10 : 50] At this point, Paul expresses some of the more personal character of his dismay. He reminds the Galatians of the bond that they once shared, speaking of himself as if a mother struggling in childbirth for them.

Paul became as the Gentile Christians of the Galatian churches. He ceased living as a Jew and lived as a Gentile. He speaks about this in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 21. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law.

He now wants them to become as he is, to live as those who are not under the law. The Gentiles were never under the law in the way that the Jews were, but they should recognize the similarities between the elementary order to which Israel was subject under the law and that to which they were subject as pagans.

When Paul first encountered the Galatians, he was suffering from a physical infirmity, perhaps as a result of some cruel punishment that had been inflicted upon him. Later in the epistle, he speaks of bearing the marks of Jesus in his body, in chapter 6.

We might also think of the thorn in the flesh that Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. Some have speculated, on the basis of the strange reference to the removal of their eyes, in verses 15, and in verse 11 of chapter 6, where Paul refers to the largeness of his writing, that his infirmity might be related to his eyesight.

[12 : 16] But I think it's most likely that the expression in verse 15 is just proverbial. The Galatian Christians are being led astray by the Judaizers, resulting in a cooling of their affection for Paul.

The Judaizers are zealous to win them over, so that the Galatian churches would be zealous for their Judaizing cause. Paul is perplexed, feeling that he must begin all over again with them.

It's like going through the agony of birth again, even after you thought you brought a child to birth. He concludes the passage with an allegorical argument from Genesis. The law isn't merely the commandments, but it's also the narrative parts of the Pentateuch.

Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar and their two sons is a strange and confusing argument to many people. However, examined more closely, it should make more sense to us. There is a strong logic to it.

It involves a series of contrasts between two sets of sons, between Ishmael and Isaac, and the realities that define them, spoken of as their mothers, Hagar and Sarah respectively.

[13 : 16] Paul's purpose is not to wrench the story of Ishmael and Isaac from its context in Genesis, and use it as an illustration of some general truths.

First, the theme of being sons of Abraham was a central one in the preceding chapter, so this isn't something that's chosen as an example at random. He is drawing a contrast between two different types of sonship of Abraham, already witnessed to in the Old Testament itself.

Second, he's revisiting the text of Genesis, and we should see that Paul's use of the story arises from themes that are very much at play there. In Genesis, Isaac is the child of promise and the spirit, while Ishmael is born of the flesh.

In the fullness of time, Gentiles have been brought to birth as the sons and daughters of Abraham, and this is a wonderful event, although it's against the regular course of nature. It's a gracious act of God by his spirit, not an achievement of the flesh.

The same God who miraculously opened the womb of Sarah has brought the Gentiles to birth. Much as Ishmael, the child of the flesh, wasn't the true heir, so true inheritance belongs to the children of promise like Isaac.

[14 : 45] For the Galatians, this means that their status must rest on something more than fleshly descent from or fleshly association with Abraham. They are free children who are no longer minors.

James Jordan describes the analogy in some depth. The reason that Hagar and Ishmael can be used to illustrate the Jews is that they were indeed the first Jews. Every Israelite was like Ishmael in that he started out uncircumcised and then was circumcised on the eighth day, as Ishmael was at the age of 13.

Like Ishmael and Abraham, Israel took upon themselves the burden of circumcision after they had lived for a time as uncircumcised. The fact that Ishmael was relieved of that burden when Isaac took it up was a message to Israel that they would be relieved of it when the Messiah took it up.

Hagar and Ishmael made an exodus into the wilderness, but came only as far as Paran. This is the truth also about Israel. Though they entered the promised land in a physical sense, they did not really enter it.

As Paul writes in Hebrews, As Ishmael was to Israel, so Israel was to Jesus.

[16 : 00] Ishmael was born into the faith of Abraham, came under the law, circumcision, and heard the promise. But the promise was not to him directly, but to a replacement, Isaac. Just so, Israel was the seed of Abraham, came under the law, and heard the promise.

But the promise was not to them directly, but to a replacement, Jesus. The circumcised Ishmael initially contested with Isaac to be the true heir of the promise. Just so, the circumcision was contesting with Jesus and his people to be the true heirs of the promise.

Ishmael needed to be cast out so that Isaac's role might be clarified. Just so, Israel needed to be cast out that Jesus' role might be clarified. Ishmael was delivered from being under the yoke of circumcision and became a God-fearer.

Just so, Israel should accept being delivered from the yoke of the law, considered as a death-dealing burden, and become God-fearers. Now, this would raise questions for us about the current state of Israel.

Israel descended from Abraham according to the flesh. And indeed, Paul takes up those questions later on in the book of Galatians to an extent, but also elsewhere in places like Romans.

[17 : 12] Israel's place is not simply negated. Casting out the bondwoman and her son becomes necessary as they persecute and obscure the status of the true heirs.

So the Galatians need to recognise what side of the allegory they stand on and deal with those acting on the side of Hagar accordingly. A question to consider.

In what ways might Jesus be compared to Isaac?