



## Galatians - Chapter Four

### III. Galatians 3:1-5:12 - Direct Appeals to the Galatians (continues)

#### III.c Galatians 3:19-4:7 - The Purpose of the Law (continues/concludes)

##### Summary of Chapter Four

The contrast presented in the previous chapter between imprisonment under the law and new relationships in Christ is now clarified by an illustration drawn from a household where sons found themselves in a similar situation to that of the household slaves until they received the full rights of sonship at the age of maturity. First, the slave-like condition of the sons while they were still minors is described and applied to the human condition. Second, the sending of God's Son to liberate slaves and to make them sons is announced. Third, the full rights of sons are disclosed.

It seems that Paul's opponents were claiming that he was not telling the whole story to the Galatians when it came to the law. Paul counters this with the story of Abraham's first two sons. His wife Sarah was barren so she gave her slave woman Hagar to Abraham so that she could bear a child on Sarah's behalf. Since being childless in that culture was a source of shame, Hagar taunted Sarah when she bore Abraham a son. This was a son according to the flesh.

Later, when Sarah did have a son Isaac according to God's promise she had Hagar and Ishmael dismissed from their presence and inheritance. Ishmael went on to be the father of the Arabian nations according to a different promise of God. Therefore, Abraham had two families: one born into slavery according to the flesh; the other born in freedom due to the promise.

Paul's opponents it seems were claiming there were now two families. Both were sons of the Gospel but one was from Isaac (the Jewish Christians), and the other from Ishmael (the Gentile Christians). Paul stands this argument on its head showing that those who followed the law were the ones in slavery, as argued in the previous chapter, while those who accepted the Gospel by faith were the ones who were truly free in Christ.

<sup>1</sup> My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; <sup>2</sup> but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. <sup>3</sup> So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.

### Galatians 4:1-3

When a son or heir is a minor and too young to receive his inheritance, he might as well be a slave. This was the situation of Paul and his fellow Israelites under the old covenant legal restrictions.

In the Greco-Roman world slaves, bondservants and servants, Greek *doulos*, were generally permitted to work for pay and to save enough to buy their freedom. Many were given positions of influence and trust in the family home or business: *<<For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away>>* (Matthew 25:14-15), which shows that some of the slaves were entrusted with immense amounts of money and responsibility.

They remain under guardians and trustees. The will would stipulate who had authority to manage the estate and take charge of the affairs of the family until the date set by the father is reached. This would normally be an age of consent for the main beneficiary, usually the eldest son.

Elemental spirits. Both here and in v.9 the expression refers to the elementary or rudimentary principles of the world that the Galatians previously followed, which for Jews would be the Mosaic Law and for Gentiles the basic concepts of their pagan religions. However, the additional overtones of demonic bondage in this phrase should not be ignored; they were, in terms of their mindset and life situation, under a legalistic system and enslaved, and Paul explains in v.8 that this enslavement was: *<<to beings that by nature are not gods>>*. Legalistic superstition and demonic domination are closely linked. Paul returns to this theme elsewhere: *<<See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ>>* (Colossians 2:8), and: *<<If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'?'>>* (Colossians 2:20-21).

In the previous chapter, Paul had argued that the law acted as a jailer and disciplinarian. These are descriptions that Paul himself would have disputed before his conversion. The Jews were God's people and even under Roman occupation did not consider themselves as slaves, as demonstrated when Jesus spoke to a group in Jerusalem: *<<Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free"?'>>* (John 8:31-33). Paul therefore gives this more positive illustration that Jews would recognise as

representing even the best of households of a child's restrictions within a family to describe Israel under the law. He then shows that with maturity comes freedom through life under Christ.

Paul is describing the condition of all Jews under the law as children not yet mature. The law contains the rules and regulations of how to correctly act under God 'in the elements of the world'. It did not contain salvation - it just outlined the need for it, which was promised and would be realised in the Gospel. The picture that Paul is painting shows a remarkable parallel journey for both Jew and Gentile, both in similar forms of bondage before Jesus came to free them. For Jew and Gentile alike, Jesus was the new Moses to lead God's people in the second Exodus.

<sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,

#### Galatians 4:4

Paul provides a simple confessional statement of the essence of the Gospel story: the incarnation and birth of Christ; his perfect life of obedience under the law; and his redemptive death on the Cross (v.5).

When the fullness of time had come. God sent his Son at the right moment in human history, <<*the date set by the father*>> (v.2), when God's providential oversight of the events of the world had directed and prepared peoples and nations for the incarnation and ministry of Christ; that is, for the proclamation of the Gospel: <<*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'*>> (Mark 1:14-15).

God's redemptive work must be understood in the framework of his actions in history. God gave an irrevocable promise to Abraham; 430 years later God gave the law through Moses; at a time God had set, he sent his Son: <<*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*>> (Romans 5:6). A time is also set for Christ's return: <<*But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*>> (Matthew 24:36), and: <<*So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority'*>> (Acts 1:6-7). The relationship of these acts of God in history provides the framework for understanding his redemptive work.

The story of how God first sent the prophets and then sent his Son is told in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, recorded in Matthew 21:33-46, Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19, which tells how Jesus was sent for his special redemptive mission.

During the Exodus account God had revealed himself by name: <<*God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.'* He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you"'>> (Exodus 3:14). In preparation for the new Exodus, God reveals his personal presence as a human among other humans, a Jew among other Jews: <<*Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am'*>> (John 8:58). God's Son Jesus, and the spirit of God's

son, are both sent out from God the Father, not as beings remote or detached from himself, but as his own self-revelation, his own personal presence.

Born of a woman indicates that the Son was fully human and therefore subject to all the inherent weaknesses, yet without sin: <<*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*>> (2 Corinthians 5:21). Through his human birth God would fulfil the most ancient of promises: <<*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel*>> (Genesis 3:15), and is confirmed in Messianic prophecy: <<*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*>> (Isaiah 9:6).

Born under the law is more than an indication of Jesus' Jewish heritage being of the line of David, with all the meaning this held for the Jewish people, for it also follows on to Paul's argument that Jesus was also subject to the curse of the law. Although Jesus did fulfil all the requirements of the law, he still experienced all the conditions of sinful humanity under the curse of the law. He was subject to temptations, suffering, loneliness, and on the Cross, God-forsakenness and death.

<sup>5</sup> in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

#### Galatians 4:5

In order to redeem those who were under the law. Jesus confirmed that a primary concern for God was to rescue the Jewish nation from their own iniquity: <<*He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'*>> (Matthew 15:24). If being under law means being under obligation to keep the law and under the curse of the law for not keeping it, then to redeem those under the law means to set them free from both the obligations to keep the law and the curse of lawbreaking.

Paul's adoption imagery probably picks up the OT concept of God calling Israel his son and combines this with the Roman notion of adopting a son, usually already a full grown adult, in order to designate him as the heir to all the family wealth. This was the great redemption, paying the price for all through Christ's sacrifice. The law could no longer require works for people to attempt to save themselves. The adoption of God's people as sons came with the Gospel. Refer also to the comments made on Galatians 3:25-26.

There is a shift in Paul's images here from the picture of a son who is treated like a slave until he reaches a certain age to the picture of a slave who becomes a son by adoption. The first picture clarifies the contrast between the two stages of redemption in history. The sending of the Son concluded the stage of slavery under law and inaugurated the new era when sons receive their inheritance. The second picture focuses on the nature of sonship itself. Believers are adopted as God's children by the sending of, and in receiving, the Son of God.

<sup>6</sup> And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

### Galatians 4:6-7

Paul changes from the first person 'we' to the second person you to indicate that the adoption received by those under law (v.5) was also received by the Gentile converts. The confession of faith of Jewish Christians is now the confession of Gentile Christians. Both are set free from the curse of the law.

Because you are children or sons. Christians are now sons and have come of age. Therefore, they are in a position to receive the inheritance, beginning with the promised Spirit of his Son. Believers not only now have knowledge of the Son, they can experience him through his Spirit and therefore enjoy an immediate relationship with God through him. There is an amazing condition expressed here. It is through receiving the free gift of adoption that one receives the Spirit.

Although the term Holy Trinity and its various derivatives did not appear in theological writings until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD, Paul's language here is probably the earliest Trinitarian type understanding in the NT Canon.

Abba is the Aramaic word for father and is used again by Paul: <<For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him>> (Romans 8:14-17). Jesus used the phrase in a prayer to God during his last evening in the Garden of Gethsemane: <<He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'>> (Mark 14:36), where he expressed confident trust and willing obedience in his Father.

Father is *patēr* in Greek and Abba in Aramaic, the everyday language spoken by Jesus and many of his disciples. It was the word used by Jewish children for their earthly fathers. However, since the term in both Aramaic and Greek was also used by adults to address their fathers, the claim that Abba means 'daddy' is misleading and runs the risk of irreverence. Nevertheless, the idea of praying to God as 'Our Father' conveys the authority, warmth and intimacy of a loving father's care. Those who do address God in this way during their prayers and praise can do so only because the Son gives them the right to do so!

You are no longer a slave but a child. A point missed in the English translations is that Paul suddenly shifts from the second person plural to the singular, pressing the point home to the reader that he or she individually has freedom in Christ.

Paul has already argued that the Jews had become enslaved by the law and their failure to fully obey it had led to their downfall. However, those who are now in Christ have been brought into the family of God with the full rights of a son and heir. No one has to become a Jew to inherit the promise made to Abraham, God gifts it to all who believe by faith in his Son.

### III.d Galatians 4:8-20 - Paul Reproves the Galatians

In this section Paul brings his rebuke of the Galatians to a conclusion and moves towards an attitude of personal appeal to the church for he had a genuine concern that they were about to walk away from the promises of the Gospel. Paul's appeal includes a stark comparison between his own ministry and that of his opponents.

#### III.d.i Galatians 4:8-11 - Passing from idolatry to the true God

The slavery that the Galatians are in danger of embracing again is not just a matter of forfeiting sonship but of abandoning the true God. They would be returning to false gods (v.8), to worldly principles and structures (vv.9-10). It would be as if they had never even heard the Gospel from Paul (v.11). For these Gentile Galatian Christians, turning to the Jewish law would be like returning to their paganism.

<sup>8</sup> Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods.

#### Galatians 4:8

When you did not know God. Having just informed them of their adoption as sons of God, Paul reminds them of what it was like before they had come to know the truth of God in Christ and the cost for not doing so: *<<inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus>>* (2 Thessalonians 1:8b). Paul is not speaking of the theoretical knowledge of God but the knowledge that comes through a personal relationship: *<<For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe>>* (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods refers to the demonic spirits that controlled the Galatians' former religious practice: *<<Whoever comes to be consecrated with a young bull or seven rams becomes a priest of what are no gods>>* (2 Chronicles 13:9b), *<<Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods, but the work of human hands – wood and stone – and so they were destroyed>>* (Isaiah 37:18-19), and: *<<Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit>>* (Jeremiah 2:11). This was something that is common to all pagans as Paul indicates to the church in Corinth: *<<No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons>>* (1 Corinthians 10:20).

It is easy to read Scripture in a cultural context and think it doesn't apply today as, for most people, paganism is a thing from a past era. Yet there remain many gods in the lives of people today, even those who profess faith in God, such as material possessions, wealth and social status. Paul perhaps sums up the human condition: *<<Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the*

**creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen>> (Romans 1:24-25).**

<sup>9</sup> Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?

### Galatians 4:9

To know God, to be known by God implies a personal relationship with God. It is far more important for one to know that God cares that much about them, that he actually wants to know them, or more precisely actually does know them: <<*Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him*>> (1 Corinthians 8:2-3). David reveals just how intimate his knowledge is of each person: <<*Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed*>> (Psalm 139:16).

How can you turn back. Before coming to know Christ as their saviour, the Gentile Galatians had worshipped pagan gods and were captive to the ideology behind it. Once God's people had left Egypt, they too wanted to return to slavery rather than face the difficulties their journey to a new land posed. Paul likens that to the journey of the Galatians, although they were not returning to pagan gods but they believed to the God of Israel. What they did not realise is that by choosing to adhere to Jewish Law, they were actually shunning God and choosing ethnicity over faith.

The Galatians may well have been shocked by Paul's assertion that turning to observance of the Jewish Law was not a way of enhancing their spiritual experience as they had imagined but was parallel to their former pagan ways. Since the law cannot overcome the guilt and shame of sin, and cannot impart new life, Paul likens turning from life in Christ to the law as equal to returning to pagan worship - of no benefit whatsoever!

The weak and beggarly elemental spirits or 'elementary principles' continues Paul's thinking from v.3. In essence, he is referring to the ways of the world.

How can you want to be enslaved to them again? Paul's concern for the Galatians is not that they may be breaking any of God's moral laws, as serious as that is, but that they are actually returning to a form of idolatry, by pursuing righteousness through the law rather than through their relationship with Jesus.

<sup>10</sup> You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years.

<sup>11</sup> I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

### Galatians 4:10-11

Special days, and months, and seasons, and years were all part of the ceremonial laws of the Mosaic covenant: <<*In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a passover-offering to the Lord*>> (Leviticus 23:5), and: <<*but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune*>>

*your vineyard*>> (Leviticus 25:4). To require Christians to follow such OT laws is to forfeit the Gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone. This also clearly implies that Christians are no longer under the Mosaic covenant.

Some commentators and scholars see days in this verse as evidence that the Jewish seventh-day Sabbath commandment was also part of the ceremonial law that Christians, under the new covenant, no longer need to follow, even if they did then make a habit of meeting on a Sunday: <<*On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight*>> (Acts 20:7), <<*On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come*>> (1 Corinthians 16:2). Paul is clear on it being a matter of personal choice: <<*Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*>> (Colossians 2:16-17). Others believe that the weekly Sabbath command is not temporary but goes back to God's pattern in creation: <<*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it*>> (Exodus 20:8-11), and that this verse relates only to other days of rest in the Jewish festal calendar.

Months most likely refers to the celebrations of the new moon that marked the start of each month since a lunar calendar was in operation at the time: <<*So David hid himself in the field. When the new moon came, the king sat at the feast to eat*>> (1 Samuel 20:24).

Seasons would be a reference to the festivals that celebrated harvests in particular: <<*On the day of the first fruits, when you offer a grain-offering of new grain to the Lord at your festival of weeks, you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not work at your occupations*>> (Numbers 28:26).

Paul is not saying that it is wrong to celebrate such festivals, just that it should not be imposed upon anyone. In fact, he clearly states that it is a matter of individual discipleship: <<*Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God*>> (Romans 14:5-6). Many church traditions still celebrate certain anniversaries in their calendar including Christmas, Lent and Easter, but the only compulsory ceremony is the Lord's Supper: <<*Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'*>> (Luke 22:19), and even then there is no stipulation of when or how often it is observed. Paul's advice is: <<*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God*>> (1 Corinthians 10:31).

I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted. If the Galatians are determined to turn away from the Gospel Paul had proclaimed to them and follow the dictates of the false teachers then Paul was concerned that his efforts would be in vain and the Galatians would be lost. Paul would again feel this anxiety for one of his churches: <<*For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labour had been in vain*>> (1 Thessalonians 3:5).

### III.d.ii Galatians 4:12-20 - Appeal to the Galatians' knowledge of Paul

The letter takes a sudden shift from the step-by-step argument that Paul has been mounting to date. Here, he tells them what he is thinking, how it feels, what sort of thoughts are rushing through his head at a more personal level. This is a heart-to-heart moment. Almost every line is an appeal to friendship, to family loyalty, to a mutual bond established by their common experience of what God has done for them together.

As in 3:1-5, Paul reminds the Galatians of what happened when they heard the Gospel. He now contrasts his own ministry with that of the false teachers.

<sup>12</sup> Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong.

#### Galatians 4:12

Friends is perhaps better translated as brothers in Christ to show the truly deep feelings that Paul held for them.

As I am. Paul is free from following Mosaic ceremonial regulations, and living by faith in Christ. He is calling for the Galatians to imitate him in his loyalty to the truth of the Gospel. He is challenging them to die to the law so that they might live for God. He is pleading with them to be as free as he is from the tyranny of the law, and to enjoy with him all the benefits of the Gospel: the Spirit, righteousness, blessing, adoption and inheritance of the promise, which are already available by faith in Christ. He is saying: <<*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*>> (1 Corinthians 11:1).

As you are. Paul had become like the Gentiles in that he did not live under the Jewish law when ministering to them: <<*To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law*>> (1 Corinthians 9:21). Paul found that the best way to reach people with the Gospel was to become fully integrated in their lives. That is equally true today.

You have done me no wrong. Paul wants to make it clear that his concern is not that the Galatians are turning away from him to follow others; his deep concern is that they are abandoning the hope they have received through Christ.

<sup>13</sup> You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; <sup>14</sup> though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

## Galatians 4:13-14

It was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you. The exact nature of this illness is not known. Because apparently means that Paul was detained in Galatia by this illness or physical condition, and therefore took the opportunity to preach to them. However, the reference to eyes in v.15 leads some to believe that it may have been to do with sight problems; this seems unlikely as indicated in the comments made there.

My condition put you to the test. Whatever Paul's illness or condition was it was sufficiently severe as to test their resolve to receive him. Yet they did, for which Paul shows his heartfelt gratitude.

Part way through Paul's first visit to Galatia, while in Lystra, he was stoned and left for dead: <<*But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds. Then they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples surrounded him, he got up and went into the city. The next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe*>> (Acts 14:19-20). He could well have still been suffering from the effects of this when he first encountered many of the Galatians.

That they welcomed Paul as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus does not indicate they saw him as such a person. Their acceptance of him was *as if* he were such a one. They could not have received him with any greater respect than they did. They accepted him despite his physical condition because his message was the redemptive love of God expressed in Christ Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

## Galatians 4:15

The goodwill you felt probably refers to the sense of joy and divine approval the Galatians had when they believed Paul's Gospel preaching and received the Holy Spirit: <<*The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?*>> (Galatians 3:2).

In essence, Paul is saying that who he was or what physical condition he was in when they first received him did not prevent him from proclaiming the Gospel, nor did it stop them from receiving it. Why then should they think that their physical condition, i.e. uncircumcision, would make any difference to Paul, anyone else or even God!

You would have torn out your eyes and given them to me is thought to be a traditional proverb that indicates their sincere love for Paul; so much so they would have willing sacrificed such an important faculty - their sight. What it means is 'I would do anything for you'.

<sup>16</sup> Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

## Galatians 4:16

This may be a rhetorical question anticipating a negative response, although the structure in the Greek indicates that it may be better to translate it as a statement. Paul often did make enemies simply by speaking the truth, such as to the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem: <<*Then he said to me, "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles." Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live'*>> (Acts 22:21-22).

The truth of the Gospel Paul had taught them had been received initially with great joy and now their minds had been so twisted by the false teachers that they viewed Paul as their enemy. One of God's prophets had warned of this: <<*They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth*>> (Amos 5:10), yet it was a primary purpose of Jesus' mission: <<*Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'* Pilate asked him, 'What is truth?'>> (John 18:37-38).

Paul asks them 'what happened to that blessing, that wonderful state of opening their hearts and lives to the word and power of the Gospel, and finding it transform them from within?' At the time they would have done anything for him. Now, since all he has done is to tell them the truth, surely they are not going to turn away from him? This is a direct appeal to the loyalty of friendship.

History shows that truthful preachers often draw large congregations initially and they are respected for their candour. However, once the truth starts to personally bite, they often turn against the messenger!

<sup>17</sup> They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them.

## Galatians 4:17

They make much of you is actually the term often translated as zealous, just as Paul had once been zealous for God and to turn people to the law, persecuting those who would not.

But for no good purpose. They were not trying to build God's family but to win converts to Judaism and thus win favour with their own kinsfolk.

To exclude you. The false teachers have been flattering the Galatians, but only to receive flattery back, an attitude that Jesus had personally countered: <<*How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?*>> (John 5:44). They wanted to form an exclusive club of those who observe Jewish ceremonial laws, keeping out any who will not give in to their demands. They had actually demonstrated a two tier system when they enticed Peter away from eating with Gentile Christians, as indicated in Galatians 2:11-14 and discussed there. They wanted to establish themselves as the elite in the Christian group because of their Jewish heritage and to make it necessary for Gentiles to join them by adhering to the Law of Moses.

So that you may make much of them. Paul describes what is now happening under the influence of the false teachers. They are zealous and convince the Galatians to follow them, but not for the benefit of the Galatians. They only seek to benefit themselves. They demand that the Galatians separate from Paul and only show allegiance to them, and their misguided doctrine.

<sup>18</sup> It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you.

#### Galatians 4:18

Paul's tribute to the Thessalonians: <<*We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming*>> (1 Thessalonians 1:2-10), is an example of what he means by to be made much of for a good purpose.

<sup>19</sup> My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, <sup>20</sup> I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

#### Galatians 4:19-20

My little children. Those whom Paul brought to faith through the Gospel he viewed as his spiritual offspring: <<*As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children*>> (1 Thessalonians 2:11). Although Paul chastises the Galatians for being foolish in 3:1 and 3:3, he nevertheless has deep emotional feelings of anguish for them – because they, like little children, have not been growing but need almost to be delivered again, and Paul's feelings about them are as agonising as birth pangs.

For whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. This rather shocking maternal image captures the extent of Paul's identification with these Christians. In his love for them, he has had to go through labour pains for them twice: when he preached the Gospel to them the first time and now again as he seeks to bring them back to the true Gospel. This is more than any mother must go through for her child. However, Paul tells his children in the faith that he is willing to endure his labour pains for them, not just twice, but until Christ is

formed in you, or as he puts it elsewhere: <<*until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ*>> (Ephesians 4:13).

I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone. Paul clearly feels that if he were with them in Galatia he would have prevented them from being led astray and would therefore not have had to write this letter of rebuke to them. This is not the same situation that he would later face in Corinth when he wrote: <<*I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ – I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!*>> (2 Corinthians 10:1). On that occasion he had been criticised for writing a severe letter to them but not being as bold in their company during a subsequent visit when he was humiliated by his opponents. This was because in the Corinthian situation any strong words during his visit would have caused them even more pain and Paul refrained from defending himself for their benefit. In Galatia, he clearly felt that his presence would have been much more beneficial in reversing the situation they now faced.

Letters are a poor substitute for personal presence for then Paul could have taught them while demonstrating his tenderness and the love he held for them as his children in the faith. Yet there are enormous benefits from his letter writing. Had Paul not written letters like this one, the church throughout the ages would have been much poorer for it.

Up to this point in his letter, Paul's dominant tone has been one of rebuke. But now that he has called for a renewal of their friendship in vv.12-20, he turns his attention to instructions. Yet still he has a heavy heart, for he is perplexed about them. What will their foolishness lead them to do? What will be the outcome of their confusion? Such questions move Paul to give clear directions in the rest of his letter, to guide his readers out of their slavery to false teaching into the freedom of the true Gospel of Christ.

### III.e Galatians 4:21-5:1 - The Allegory of Hagar and Sarah

Paul continues to emphasise the chasm between being a free child of God and being a slave to the law, sin, and false gods. The background to this passage is Genesis 16-17 and 21. Abraham's son Ishmael, his firstborn, represents the enslaved sons of Abraham through the enslaving Sinai covenant because he was Abraham's son through the slave woman Hagar. Isaac, on the other hand, represents the free sons of Abraham as discussed in Galatians 3:7 and 3:29.

<sup>21</sup> Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law?

#### Galatians 4:21

You who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? Paul plays on the different senses of law: it can mean the commandments given by God to Moses during the wilderness wanderings, which the Galatians misguidedly want to obey in their totality. It can also mean the first five books of the Bible as a whole. Paul's challenge to them here is to question themselves to see if they truly understand what it means to be under the law and its consequences: <<*All who*

*have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law*>> (Romans 2:12).

<sup>22</sup> For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. <sup>23</sup> One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise.

#### Galatians 4:22-23

For it is written. The account of Abraham having a son with Sarah's maid Hagar is told in Genesis 16. After Sarah gave birth to Isaac according to the promise of God (Genesis 18:9-15), she insisted that Hagar and her child should be sent away, which is recorded in Genesis 21.

Flesh represents human desires, principles and the sin that contaminates them. Ishmael was the son born when Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands by trying to perpetuate their family line through the slave woman Hagar.

The promise is the absolute opposite of flesh, since it is a word from God that will be fulfilled by God: *<<Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised>>* (Romans 4:18-21), just as Isaac was born by God's miraculous work: *<<By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised>>* (Hebrews 11:11).

<sup>24</sup> Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery.

#### Galatians 4:24

This is an allegory refers to an illustration that depicts a general principle.

These two events also represent a spiritual truth that goes beyond the natural event. They represent the two covenants of God with man. First, at Mount Sinai, the law to slavery is Hagar. All who are similarly born under the law are obligated to keep the whole law, including all the sacrifices, rites and ceremonies. They remain under the curse because no mere mortal was ever able to perform such a requirement.

<sup>25</sup> Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

#### Galatians 4:25

Arabia refers to the Roman province of that name and included much of what is today Saudi Arabia, Jordan and southern Syria. Paul had journeyed to Arabia shortly after his encounter with Jesus near Damascus; refer to Galatians 1:17.

In slavery. The city of Jerusalem ought to be the capital city of the ‘Israel of God’ <<As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God>> (Galatians 6:16), but instead it remains a stronghold of Israel according to the flesh, i.e. Jews who have not turned to Jesus. As a result, the city is just as it was when occupied in Isaiah’s time – enslaved.

<sup>26</sup> But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. <sup>27</sup> For it is written,

‘Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children,  
burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs;  
for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous  
than the children of the one who is married.’

### Galatians 4:26-27

She is free, and she is our mother. All those who believe in Christ belong to the heavenly Jerusalem above and are the true Israel: <<But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering>> (Hebrews 12:22), <<And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband>> (Revelation 21:2). As prophesied in Isaiah 54:1 quoted here, the exile did not spell the end for the people of God. God will again work supernaturally to bring about the new birth of children where there are none, even among the Gentiles.

<sup>28</sup> Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac.

### Galatians 4:28

Like Isaac. In a way analogous to Isaac’s miraculous birth, the Galatians have become God’s children by an act of God’s gracious and miraculous power, not by human effort. So Paul’s purpose for his allegorical interpretation of Genesis 21 is to identify the Galatian Christians as the children of freedom and to instruct them to resist those who would lead them into slavery under the law.

<sup>29</sup> But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.

### Galatians 4:29

So it is now also. Just as Ishmael persecuted Isaac, not explicitly mentioned in the OT, but suggested by Genesis 21:9-10 NIV: <<But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac”>>, so now the Jews who seek justification by human effort are persecuting Christians who trust God’s promise of justification by faith in Christ alone. This too is mirrored in the fact that now non-Christian and pseudo-Christian Jews are persecuting Christians like Paul, as seen

in: <<*From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body*>> (Galatians 6:17). History is repeating itself.

<sup>30</sup> But what does the scripture say? ‘Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.’ <sup>31</sup> So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

### Galatians 4:30-31

Drive out the slave and her child and, by implication, all those represented by them in this allegory, i.e. those who seek justification through their own efforts. This implies that those who teach the false Gospel of justification by works should not be allowed to remain and teach in a church that follows Christ.

Genesis 21:10 shows that Hagar and Ishmael, the child of the slave, were driven out from Abraham’s camp, and that he did not receive any inheritance as the first born son. That went to the child of the free woman, Isaac. Jerusalem had been in slavery since the time of the Babylonian exile and was under the Romans at the time of Paul. Just over 20 years after this letter was written God permitted the Romans to drive out the Jews from Jerusalem in AD70, once again losing their inheritance for failing to obey God. This time it was their failure to receive his Son as their Messiah.

**Galatians 5:1 is included here to complete the section under review.**

<sup>5:1</sup> For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

### Galatians 5:1

Paul indicates that Christ has set us free from Jewish ceremonial laws and regulations; refer to the comments made on 2:11-12, but not from obedience to God’s moral standards as indicated in 5:14-6:1.

Christ has released believers from the bondage of the Law which no man could ever fulfil, thereby saving themselves. They must stand firm in the liberty given by Christ’s sacrifice for all humankind. They must not become entangled and under the burden of weight as if putting a yolk on their necks to pull a heavy load.

Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery can mean the slavery of life according to the world or life according to the law, whichever one applies to those not under Christ. For the Jew, they bore the yoke of the rabbi whose teaching they followed. Jesus offers something so much better: <<*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*>> (Matthew 11:29-30).