

THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

Sunday 22nd January 2006 6:30pm

Galatians 3:26 to 4:7

Service led by John Martin

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, [27] for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. [28] There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. [29] If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

[4:1] What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. [2] He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. [3] So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. [4] But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, [5] to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. [6] Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." [7] So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

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Has it ever struck you as strange that the speed limits on our roads are always multiples of 10 miles per hour? In towns you get 30 and 40 MPH, out on trunk roads you get 60 and 70MPH, and in some built-up areas we now have 20MPH zones. So how does this happen? Surely the actual safe speed for any particular piece of road is not always going to be an exact multiple of 10MPH! The safe speed for a road might actually be 33.6MPH or 67.2MPH ... and we all know that the A505 to Baldock is perfectly safe at 87.9MPH!

Yet we somehow accept that these limits are in place and, by and large, we stick to them ... especially since the introduction of speed-cameras - or, to give them their Politically Correct name: Safety Cameras. You and I might think of them as Police Cash Machines, but that's another issue!

So, imagine one morning getting into your car to drive to work. You switch the radio on and listen to the news. This is what you hear:

"The government this morning announced the abolition of all speed limits on all roads. The speed-limit signs will remain in place, but they may be ignored. In a press release this morning, the Minister of Transport said: 'It's time to remove these nanny-state restrictions and place responsibility on the individual. Drivers should at all times drive responsibly, taking into account their own safety, the safety of their passengers and other road users, instead of slavishly following the speed-signs which belong to a previous generation.'"

Well - imagine that! Think of the freedom! No more piddling along at 30MPH on empty roads where you know full well that it's perfectly safe to drive at 40.

But then, of course, the well-meaning busy-bodies like the AA, the RAC and RoSPA will be up in arms. "No, no" they will say. "Bring back the speed limits - we all knew where we stood with them. We can't trust people to take their responsibilities seriously." And they would start campaigns pleading with people to stick to the old limits, and they would try to reverse the change in law.

Strange isn't it, that the opposition would come mainly from the motoring organisations.

Strange, isn't it, that St Paul's most troublesome opponents were not the heathens he was preaching to, nor the Roman or Greek authorities - but the church, which he himself was building as he travelled round the Aegean Sea area preaching the gospel.

At one point, he tells us, he even had to rebuke the great Apostle St Peter! These opponents were Christians, of course, and shared the work of Paul in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. But they had one fault - they could not completely let go of their Jewish, Old Testament heritage. Many converts to Christianity from Judaism still practised the million-and-one rules and regulations of the Old Testament Law ... and some insisted that new converts to Christianity from the non-Jewish world also did the same. Some of them even wanted new converts to become Jews by circumcision first before they could become Christians by baptism. Others just wanted new converts to observe the Jewish customs and laws.

It's perhaps easy to think that it doesn't really matter. After all, all those Old Testament laws were mostly quite reasonable and not a bad way of conducting your life: do not murder, do not steal, do not lie etc etc. We looked at a lot of them when we studied Exodus and I don't think any of them struck us as particularly unreasonable. Maybe some of the regulations about the preparation of food and the ritual use of animals are a bit irrelevant, but, on the whole, those laws are still the foundation of most legal and criminal systems around the world today.

Put yourself in the shoes of a Jew at the time. You have spent your entire life trying to keep the laws of Moses. You participate every week and month in the rituals and festivals of that faith, believing that by doing so, you are keeping the laws that God gave to your nation and family 3000 years beforehand. Those laws and rituals are part of your culture, your belief, your way of life and your nationality as well as of your religion. They are as familiar and normal for you as football on Saturday and roast beef on Sunday.

Then along comes Jesus. In a way quite a shock, but in another way quite familiar. He is after all, the Messiah that you've been reading about in your scriptures since childhood. Jesus was a Jew too surely a keeper of the laws if ever there was one. He's hardly likely to tell you to abandon the practice of your own faith, is he? So yes - let's believe in him as the Messiah, the Christ and follow him but surely there's no harm in continuing with the observance of the laws of Moses too, is there?

Then along comes this St Paul geezer - himself a Jew amongst Jews and expert in every letter of the law - who says the opposite. He says: do not expect or require any new believers to have to conform to the laws of Moses, and, what's more, stop doing it yourself!

Just imagine how hard those words must have been on Jewish ears. Paul was asking them essentially to abandon virtually everything in their culture that defined them as a people, as a nation. You may as well ask the British to give up fish & chips, driving on the left, football, cricket and warm beer!

But Paul is adamant: his point against the laws, and the Judaeisers who insisted on the observance of those laws, is not that the laws were bad but that people were still RELYING on them to bring righteousness. And by doing so, they were essentially saying that the salvation and righteousness that comes from trusting in Jesus Christ is not enough.

Paul was a theologian - a man who had studied law at university - and knew better than the other apostles, the function of the law. The laws of Moses were put in place to show people what sin was. Break the law and you die. If you can live by the law perfectly then you would live. But nobody could - only Jesus. And the first three chapters of this letter to the Galatians are spent trying to bring that point home.

And verses 21 to 25 of chapter 3 summarize this point. You heard them last week, lets hear them again:

If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. [22] But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

[23] Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. [24] So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. [25] Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Paul says we have to let go. It's like when you've learnt to swim. You've learnt that the water will support you and that you can move through it and not sink and yet you persist in holding on to the side of the swimming pool. So what? Is that a bad thing? Well yes it is it shows you don't trust the water after all. And this Jesus - the swimming instructor who gave his life so that we might swim - has given his life in vain.

I was a bit worried when we were doing our studies in Exodus, because reading and studying all those laws of Moses for so long can have a negative effect as well. It can, if we're not careful, make us think that the keeping of those laws of the Old Covenant could still make us right before God. And quite honestly they can't! Far be it from me to quote from my own sermons, but nearly two years ago when we were in Exodus, I said this:

Yes, Therfield, I am standing in your pulpit and telling you not to even attempt to live your lives in obedience to the laws of God as revealed to Moses in Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and the rest. I'm not saying that we should ignore them or deliberately break them - otherwise I wouldn't be standing here tonight - and they are very useful for showing us more of the nature of God and give us excellent guidelines about running a fair and just society - but I am urging you not to seek righteousness by slavishly following this legal code.

The laws of Moses show us our sin. We cannot and should not try to earn our salvation by attempting to live by those laws - their purpose has been completed. Rather we should turn to Christ, who has already paid the price of our sins by his own death on the cross. He offers us forgiveness, and freedom from the old laws of sin and death. Slavish obedience to the laws of Moses will not make us into sons and daughters of God any more than slavishly obeying all the laws of the United Kingdom will make us loving, decent citizens. It takes more than that. We need to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. Jesus offers us new life - a life filled with his Spirit. Let us go forward to live this life of the Spirit, and not slip back into the old legalistic ways which lead only to condemnation and death.

That's not to say that we should lead reckless lives, of course. But it does mean that we give-up the rule book and learn to follow the teachings and example of Christ. It means we allow the Holy Spirit, working through our own consciences and hearts, and through the church and teachings of the apostles, to guide us in the ways of things that are pleasing to God.

And why does God want us to live this way? Because he wants children, not slaves. He wants to have the love and respect of a family, not the slavish obedience of robots. That's why he gave us life and life in all its abundance through Christ.

Paul tells us this in verse 26 of tonight's passage:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

This is powerful stuff.

And for the Jews who had become Christians, there is an even bigger shock in store. Verses 28 & 29: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

The Jews, the descendants of Abraham, had always regarded themselves as God's children as a matter of right. If you were born into a Jewish family, your religion and nationality were fixed at that point. There was no need to "become" a Jew. You were one by birth.

You could also become a Jew if you weren't born one. The conversion required a man to be circumcised first. Then the man would cut his hair and his nails, undress completely and would be baptised by immersion in water. He would make confession of faith and parts of the law were read to him, words of encouragement were said, and benedictions were pronounced. When he emerged he was a member of the Jewish faith; so it was through baptism that he entered into that faith.

No wonder then that John the Baptist used this ritual during his ministry and no wonder that Jesus chose baptism as the sign of entry into the church.

By Christian baptism we enter into Christ. The early Christians looked on baptism as something which produced a real union with Christ. The descent under the water is a symbol of joining with Christ in his death and burial; the coming up out of the water is a symbol of resurrection to new life and cleansing.

Paul goes on to say that they had put on Christ. This might be a reference to a custom which certainly existed later, where the candidate for baptism was clothed in pure white robes, symbolic of the new life into which he entered. Just as the convert put on his new white robe, his life was clothed with Christ.

But baptism is not by water only - that's just the outward sign. And in a parallel passage in 1 Cor. 12:12-13, Paul reminds us that we are baptised by the Holy Spirit, not just by man:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. [13] For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

The result is that in the Church there is no difference between any of the members; we have all become sons of God. In verse 28 Paul says that the distinction between Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female is wiped out. And again this probably came as a shock to the Jewish converts. In the Jewish morning prayer the Jew thanks God that "Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a

slave or a woman." Paul takes that prayer and reverses it. The old distinctions are gone; all are one in Christ.

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (v29)

At the start of chapter 4, Paul returns to an earlier analogy he started in Chapter 3 v 15 where he introduces the idea of a boy being the heir to a fortune. The fortune belongs to the boy, but the boy cannot do anything with it until he comes of age. In the meantime, the fortune is managed by someone else - a trustee - who will administer the fortune on the boy's behalf. In a sense, the boy is no better than a slave because he has no control over his own affairs. If the trustee is wise, he will have shown by example how to manage money responsibly and wisely.

When the boy comes of age, he gains the inheritance and is no longer bound by the rules of the Trusteeship. The process of coming of age was a bit different in ancient time compared to how it is for us today.

In the Jewish world, on the first Sabbath after a boy had passed his twelfth birthday, his father took him to the Synagogue, where he became A Son of the Law. The father would say a benediction:

"Blessed be thou, O God, who has taken from me the responsibility for this boy."

The boy then said a prayer

"O my God and God of my fathers! On this solemn and sacred day, which marks my passage from boyhood to manhood, I humbly raise my eyes unto thee, and declare with sincerity and truth, that henceforth I will keep thy commandments, and undertake and bear the responsibility of mine actions towards thee."

There was a clear dividing line between being a boy and being a man.

Maybe the distinction for us isn't so clear these days. But the distinction Paul is making on a spiritual level is very clear. Paul is saying that when the Galatians-and all of us-were children, we were under the tyranny of the law; then, when everything was ready, Christ came and released us from that tyranny. So now we are no longer slaves of the law; we have become sons and have entered into our inheritance. The childhood which belonged to the law is past; the freedom of adult life has come.

Why was "the time right" just then? why couldn't God have sent Jesus a long time before? Well, I don't know if we'll ever answer that fully, but humanly speaking, the first century AD was certainly a good time for the Messiah to come. Roman civilization had brought peace and a road system which facilitated travel; the Greek civilization provided a language which was adopted as the common language of the empire; the Jews had proclaimed monotheism and the messianic hope in the synagogues of the Mediterranean world. It was then that God sent His Son, Jesus, out of heaven and to earth on a mission.

Whatever. In God's timetable, the time was right. And the arrival of Jesus, his teaching, his death and his resurrection were the turning point for Israel and the rest of the world. It was time to change from being slaves under law to becoming his adult children under grace.

The proof that we are now grown-up sons and daughter comes from the instinctive cry of the heart, Paul tells us. We cry, "Father!" to God. Paul uses the double phrase, "Abba! Father!" It must have been frequently used by Jesus, and maybe that's why the Aramaic word Abba has been kept in our translations. It is more accurately translated as "Daddy". This instinctive cry of the heart, Paul believes, is the work of the Holy Spirit. If our hearts cry Abba Father, we know that we are sons and daughters, and all the inheritance promised to Abraham's seed is ours.

And on a technical note, it's worth pointing out that doesn't make the Church the "new Israel". Israel as a nation still has its own history and destiny. But Abraham's Seed is clearly defined in verse 16 as Christ himself. Therefore being in Christ makes a believer a part of that seed and an heir of the promise to Abraham. This is the spiritual seed of Abraham, who are not Jews. These are the Gentiles - you and I - who believe and become Abraham's spiritual seed. We inherit the promise of justification by faith as Paul explained earlier in Galatians (3:6-9).

So there you have it: Galatians 3:26 to 4:6 ... a passage of pure theology. No telling-off, none of Paul getting angry, no exhortations to change your ways but an explanation of why we have now moved away from being under the laws of Moses to being under the loving grace of our father. By explaining this theology to the Galatians and, in particular, to those Jewish believers who still wanted compliance with the laws of Moses, Paul was hoping to settle the argument once and for all. Sometimes explanations are better than merely shouting the odds till you're blue in the face. He's already done that back at the start of chapter 3:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. [2] I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? [3] Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?

I'm sure we at Therfield are intelligent and reasonable people. An explanation is worth more than an exclamation. There should be no need for anyone to shout "You foolish Therfieldonians!" But let's just make sure that we never try to live our lives by the rules in the laws of Moses. We have Jesus and his Spirit living within us. Praise him! It's time to let go of the side of the swimming pool- and swim! Imagine the joy in God's heart when we look up at him from the swimming pool and shout: "Hey Father, Daddy ... we're swimming! And the water's great!"

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