GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

GALATIANS: FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE

Session Three: NO LONGER A SLAVE

Text: Galatians 4:1–5:1

CENTRAL THEME

God sends his Son to bring us into his household and sends the Spirit of his Son so that we may call upon him as Father.

The Christian life begins within that gift of belonging. Yet we often live as though our place remains uncertain and another demonstration of usefulness is required.

Paul speaks to that fear:

You are a child and an heir.

We will ask what it means to hear that promise when we have become accustomed to living as servants on probation.

1. LIVING IN THE HOUSE WITHOUT ENJOYING THE INHERITANCE

Paul begins with an heir who is still a child, under guardians until the time appointed by the father. The child's life is restricted, although the inheritance will be his.

The image helps Paul describe the movement from custody into the freedom Christ brings.

It also gives us a question to consider. How often do we live within the church as though we were waiting for permission to belong? We know its language. We perform its tasks. Yet beneath the activity lies the suspicion that we have not quite become the kind of people God can receive.

Paul announces what God has done about our captivity.

2. GOD SENT HIS SON

In 4:4, God sends his Son at the appointed time. He is born of a woman and born under the law.

Christ enters the life we actually have. He does not call from a safe distance with instructions for escaping it. He comes into human dependence and into the conditions under which the law accuses and death threatens.

This keeps the promise from becoming an abstraction. When we speak to someone afraid of death, we have more than an idea of divine sympathy to offer. The Son has entered our mortal life.

The one who brings us to the Father has come all the way to where we are.

3. TO RECEIVE ADOPTION

The purpose of the sending is redemption and adoption. God brings those under the law into the standing of his children.

Adoption does not describe a trial arrangement in which a child must demonstrate that the household made a wise investment. The relationship is given.

Paul's language of sonship carries the claim to inheritance. Read it with 3:28: women share this full standing in Christ. There are no lesser heirs created by baptism.

We can hear the words and still imagine God asking for another report. Paul directs us back to the Son who has been sent for us. Our place rests in what God has done through him.

4. GOD SENT THE SPIRIT OF HIS SON

Then God sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying to the Father.

Notice the order in 4:6. The Spirit is sent because they are children. Their cry does not persuade God to adopt them. It arises within the relationship he has given.

That is a freeing word for prayer. We do not have to establish our credentials before bringing our need. The Spirit gives us the address of children.

Some days that prayer will be confident. Some days it will scarcely be more than a cry. The Father does not confuse a child's inability to speak well with a loss of belonging.

5. NO LONGER A SLAVE

A slave must attend to what is demanded. An heir receives a future through belonging.

Paul's announcement in 4:7 changes the ground beneath the hearer's feet. The person who has lived by the question of whether enough has been done is given an inheritance in Christ.

This does not remove work from life. Children also have tasks, and neighbors still have needs. But the work no longer carries the burden of securing our place before God.

There is considerable relief in that. A meal can become a meal prepared for someone hungry. It does not have to double as evidence for the defense of the cook.

6. KNOWN BY GOD

In 4:9, Paul begins with their knowledge of God and then corrects the direction of the sentence. More fundamentally, they are known by God.

That correction can sustain a person whose own powers are failing. We forget. We lose concentration. Grief can make a familiar confession feel distant. Illness can leave us unable to finish a prayer.

The promise does not depend upon our keeping God clearly in view. He knows us.

A child asleep in a parent's arms is not maintaining the relationship by constant attention. The child is being held. There are times when faith needs to hear that much, without another task being added.

7. WHY WOULD WE GO BACK

Paul asks why they would return to bondage. From the outside, the return seems absurd. From within our fear, it can feel sensible.

A condition gives us something to measure. We can count observances and compare results. Even an exhausting arrangement may seem preferable to depending upon a gift we cannot control.

The old self wants a place in the machinery of its own salvation. It would rather remain anxious with something to claim than receive everything without a claim.

The Gospel keeps interrupting that arrangement. Christ has not brought us into freedom so that we may develop a more sophisticated form of captivity.

8. WHEN A USEFUL PRACTICE BECOMES A MASTER

Paul's concern about observing days, months, seasons, and years belongs within this argument about returning to bondage.

A calendar can help us remember God's gifts. A regular time for prayer can be a blessing. But a useful practice can acquire an authority it was never meant to possess.

We begin to think that missing the observance means losing our standing, or that keeping it gives us a claim upon God.

Then the gift has become a master. We are no longer receiving help in hearing the promise. We are trying to secure the promise by our observance.

Paul calls us back to the giver.

9. A PASTOR WHO WANTS CHRIST FOR HIS PEOPLE

In 4:12–20, Paul recalls their welcome when he came among them in bodily weakness. His authority did not depend upon an impressive appearance. They had received the word through a vulnerable messenger.

Now he fears that other teachers are drawing their affection toward themselves. He speaks with the anguish of someone who loves these people.

He wants Christ to be formed in them.

This is a searching description of pastoral work. The pastor's purpose is not to become indispensable as the person whose approval determines everything. It is to give Christ to people who will need his promise when the pastor is nowhere nearby.

10. HAGAR AND SARAH

The argument in 4:21–31 is difficult. Paul tells us that he is reading the story allegorically, associating Hagar with Sinai and slavery, and the free woman's line with the Jerusalem above and the promise.

His immediate hearers include people who want to place themselves under the law. He turns a story from the law toward the distinction between bondage and freedom.

We should not pretend that his severe language is easy. Read Genesis 21 as well, where God hears and provides for Hagar and Ishmael. Paul's particular use of the story does not exhaust what Scripture says about them.

The question here concerns the ground of the inheritance.

11. CHILDREN OF PROMISE

Paul addresses his hearers as children of promise, like Isaac. The family is constituted by God's giving.

His allegory is not permission to identify modern peoples as disposable or to withhold welcome from Jewish or Muslim neighbors. It serves this dispute about whether the law can provide the standing God gives through Christ.

For us, the question comes close to home. Will we let the promise determine who we are, or will we keep trying to establish a more controllable identity?

God's children have much to learn. They remain capable of serious failure. But their Father does not wait for a finished account of their spiritual development before speaking his promise.

12. STAND IN THE FREEDOM CHRIST HAS GIVEN

Galatians 5:1 brings the argument to its summons. Christ has set us free; we are to stand in that freedom rather than take up bondage again.

The freedom comes first. Paul does not command the Galatians to produce it. He directs them to remain where Christ's action has placed them.

This means we must keep hearing the Gospel. Our tendency to return to ourselves has not vanished. We still need someone to speak the promise when we have turned it into another demand.

Your place in the household is given in Christ.

You may come to the Father with the need you actually have.

CLOSING

What is the difference between being useful to God and being received as his child?

How does Paul's correction about being known by God speak to someone whose confidence or capacity to pray has weakened?

When has a helpful religious practice become a source of fear?

And what would it mean this week to stand in a freedom already given, rather than try to achieve a freedom you do not yet possess?

The Father's knowledge of you does not expire when your attention fails. God has sent his Son. He has given his Spirit. Your prayer begins within that gift.