

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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A look at the Epistle to the Galatians: Galatians 5

In the days when the slave market was part of everyday life, a well known Christian gentleman was wandering through the slave market. His eye fell on a likely looking slave. He bought him. The slave, knowing his new owner to be a Christian, looked on him with contempt. "I would have thought you would be the last person to buy me as a slave," he sneered. "But I've bought you to set you free," the Christian answered. "Sir," the slave replied in wonder, "I'll serve you forever!"

It would be unimaginable to think that that slave would ever again put himself under the bondage of another master. Yet, as we have seen over the past few weeks, Paul's letter to the Galatians is addressed to Christians who, through the redemptive work of Christ at Calvary, had been set free from slavery - slavery from sin and slavery from Moses' Law, but were now going back to that Law for salvation.

In chapter 5 of this letter, we turn from the doctrinal, or teaching, part of Paul's letter to the practical consequences of this teaching. This is a pattern followed by Paul in most of his epistles. First of all, God teaches us what He has done for us in Christ. Then, and only then, does God show us the kind of people He wants us to be as new creatures in Christ.

It will be convenient today to deal with our chapter in 5 sections - 5 bite-sized portions, if you'll allow the expression. They are:

Verses 1-6	Born Free
Verses 7-12	You ran well
Verses 13-18	Liberty not licence
Verses 19-21	The natural man
Verses 22-26	The new man

Born Free – verses 1-6

Verse 1 essentially sums up the whole message of this epistle. Let's listen to its clarion call: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."

"Born Free" is, of course, the title of the well known book and film which tell the story of Elsa, the lioness. As an abandoned cub, Elsa was brought up by Joy Adamson and her husband. But the day came when Joy realised that Elsa could no longer go on living in her captive environment. She had been born free. Her destiny was to live her life in the wild - a free lioness. At considerable heart-ache to themselves, Joy and her husband began to prepare Elsa for her liberty. Eventually she was successfully released into the wild - born free and living free. By the grace of God, not because we deserved it, we too have been set free - free from the penalty of sin, free from the power of sin and, in a day to come, free from the very presence of sin itself. The Galatian Christians had believed this, but now some were telling them that to be a proper Christian, they needed something more than Christ's work at Calvary - they needed to keep the Law of Moses and, as a sign that they were under that Law, to be circumcised. So Paul warns them in verse 2: "If you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing." What solemn words! All those sufferings of Christ at Calvary, all His abandonment on the cross - all for nothing? God forbid!

We need today to heed this same warning. Never let me think that I need anything for my salvation, for peace with God, other than that which the Lord Jesus has already done at Calvary. Never let me say that to be a Christian, I need Christ and...whatever that extra might be. Of course, as we shall see as we move down this chapter, there are features which should be seen in my life as a Christian. But these are "things that accompany salvation", as Hebrews 6:9 tells us. They can never be the basis of my salvation.

Keeping the Law can never be the basis of that salvation. That Law stands as a monument to man's inability to keep it. The person under the Law "is a debtor to keep the whole law," Paul warns in verse 3. No amount of obedience can make up for one act of disobedience.

It is noteworthy that when, in Acts 15, the early church in Jerusalem met together to consider the relationship of the Christian and Moses' Law, they described that Law as "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear". They went on to add, "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved." Christian, in Christ you have been born free! Don't go back to slavery! Remember Jesus' promise, "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Philip Bliss's old hymn puts it well:

*Free from the law, O happy condition,
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission;
Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,
Grace hath redeemed us once for all.*

You Ran Well – verses 7-12

Verse 7 is one of the saddest verses in the Bible. Here it is in the New International Version: "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?" Sadly, in the Bible we come across many who began so well, and then made shipwreck of the life of faith. King Saul, the first king of Israel, began well, but ended his days confessing, "I have played the fool" (1 Samuel 26:21). King Solomon was another who began so well. At the beginning of his reign, he confessed to God, "I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in...therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people" (1 Kings 3:7-9). God was pleased with his prayer and, in addition to making him the wisest man who had ever lived, gave him riches and honour. Sadly, Solomon's great wealth and his many wives turned his heart away from God.

The Galatian Christians had begun so well. So great was their joy when Paul first brought them the good news of the Gospel that Paul could write, "...You would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me" (4:15). But now, because of these false teachers of the Law, they were in danger of being diverted off the path of true Christian faith. In the Greek games of that time, each athlete was expected to run within the lane allotted to him. But occasionally, some runners would move in on their competitors to try to get them off course. In a spiritual sense, that was just what these teachers of the Law were doing to the Galatian Christians.

Christian listener, if Paul were writing to you, or to me, today, would he have to say, "You ran well?" Once you followed Christ so well, but now you've wandered away from Him. Listener, has someone, or something, cut in on your life to turn you away from Christ? For the sinner, as well as for the saint of God, the words of the chorus are still true:

*There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin,
There's a door that is open and all may go in.
At Calvary's cross is where you begin
When you come, as a sinner, to Jesus.*

For if the Bible shows us those who began well and ended so badly, it also shows those who began badly but ended so well. Peter, who denied his Master with oaths and curses, yet in true repentance was restored to that same Master. So much so that, only a few weeks later, Peter preached and over 3,000 were saved (see Acts 2). John Mark, who gave up as one of Paul's companions on Paul's first missionary journey. Yet just before Paul was martyred, he could write, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). To that failed servant, Mark, God entrusted the writing of the Gospel of Mark, the Good News of God's perfect Servant.

Trusting Jesus and...whatever that "and" might be, can begin in such a small way, but the results are catastrophic. So Paul writes, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (verse 9). Bread making depends on the fact that a little yeast, added to dough, will gradually work its way throughout the whole lump of dough. In the Bible, leaven, or yeast, is always a picture of evil, insidiously working away and corrupting everything it contacts. It is interesting that Paul addresses these identical words to the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 5:6). At Corinth, it was moral evil, wicked living, which was doing its evil work in the Corinthian church. Here it is doctrinal Evil, false teaching, which is doing its evil work.

In verse 11, Paul writes about "the offence of the cross". The Greek word translated "offence" is the word from which we get our word "scandal" - the scandal of the cross. It adds respectability to the flesh, to the natural "me", to think that there are things which I can add to the cross of Christ to merit my salvation. The "scandal of the cross" cuts right across any such thinking. The cross stands as the witness of man's total inability to save himself, and of God's great love in meeting man's need in the death of His Son.

Liberty Not Licence – verse 13-18.

In verse 13, Paul takes up again the call to liberty which he had sounded in the opening verse, but goes on to point out the responsibilities of that liberty: "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." Sadly, there are many today who, in pursuit of liberty, have given themselves up to a ceaseless round of pleasure, of sex and drugs, only to find that their supposed liberty is bitter bondage. Christian liberty is not licence to sin but rather the freedom to love and to serve. It is the liberty to be the person God wants me to be and not a slave of sin. It is the liberty Jesus knew when, on that night before His death, He said to His disciples, "I am among you as the One who serves" (Luke 22:27). "Whose service is perfect freedom", says a well-known prayer.

That liberty to be the person God wants me to be can only be worked out in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. So Paul continues, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (verse 16). Walking is one of man's earliest and distinctive activities. Consequently, it is used in the Bible as a symbol of man's activities. It is noteworthy that in this epistle to the Galatians there are probably more references per page to the Holy Spirit than in any book of the New Testament. It is not difficult to see the reason for this. Paul is at great pains to point out to these Galatian Christians that the Christian life is not produced by the external force of the Law, but rather by the internal power of the Holy Spirit. As we shall discover in verse 22, it is significant that the first fruit of the Spirit listed there is love. Christian liberty is to be expressed through love - firstly, love for God and then for one another. We began by thinking about the slave who had been bought by his master to be set free. His response of love to his new master was, "Sir, I'll serve you forever". May that also be our response to our heavenly Master!

The Natural Man – verses 19-21

As I was thinking about today's chapter, in the road outside our house the men were at work renewing the sewers. There are traffic lights in the road and its one lane at a time. It's a necessary job and we're glad it's being done. But oh! The noise - the drilling and the banging, and the inconvenience of trying to get out in the car! In the verses before us here, it's only too sadly obvious that man is at work, the natural man, sinful man. Let's listen to the sorry catalogue: "Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions..." (verses 19 and 20) Do we need to go on? What an apt picture of life in the 1st century AD and in our 21st century! Paul solemnly goes on: "Those who practise such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (verse 21). As Christians, none of us is immune from slipping into any of these sins, for we all have this natural man within us. But through the death of Christ, we have been delivered from the bondage to sin, from the habitual practice of these things. We have been given a new nature, eternal life, the very life of God, which expresses itself in the power of God's indwelling Holy Spirit.

The new man – verses 22-26

And so we can turn in thankfully, from this sordid list, to the kind of life lived in the power of the Spirit, the new man. What a happy picture it is! Paul writes, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such, there is no law" (verses 22 and 23). We have already thought about the noisy picture of men at work. By contrast, if you were to go into an orchard on a sunny, summer's day, you might think nothing was happening, nobody was at work. Apart from the buzzing of the bees, all is quiet. But much is happening! Fruit, springing out of life, is growing. So the Spirit of God quietly working away in the Christian would produce fruit for God.

There isn't time to go into the details of these two lovely verses. God willing, that will be developed more fully in the next series of talks on "The Holy Spirit". We should just notice that the fruit is one, but revealed in these nine lovely facets, each of which should be seen in the life of every Christian. They are all seen perfectly in the life of Christ. The first three, love, joy, peace, display fruit Godward, although as we have already noted, true love for God must show itself in love for one another. The next three, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, are manward. The last three, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, are self ward. Life lived in this way will be wholly acceptable to God. His Law will have nothing to say against it.

So Paul continues, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (verse 25). It is interesting that the word used here for "walk" is different from the general word used in verse 16. Here it carries the force of "keep in step with the Spirit". Here's an army of soldiers on the march. "Left, right, left, right", the call goes out. But one of the soldiers, with his eyes on the captain in front, notices that he is out of step. So with a quick hop, he rapidly gets himself back into step again. Hebrews 12:2 invites us, "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith". It is as we do this, that the Holy Spirit of God will be able to show us where we are out of step with our Saviour. Only in this way, will we grow like Jesus and be able to bring forth this lovely fruit for God and for one another. May it be so, for His Name's sake!

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