

NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS -PART 5

Throughout chapter 4, Paul relentlessly presses his point. There are two totally opposite ways of looking at the Christian life. If we see it as coming to the cross by faith to get forgiven but then going back to rules to live, we are like children who have not grown up and therefore need to be kept under strict control, or even worse like slaves who are trapped in something from which they cannot escape. Our heavenly Father cared for His children by doing two things for them. Firstly seeing how our failure to meet the Law's demands had made us into its slaves, He sent Jesus, His Son, to redeem us. The Greek word, 'redeem' means 'buy a slave from the market by paying the price for him and then setting him free.' This is what Jesus did for us on the cross. Secondly God put the Holy Spirit into our hearts to live the life of Jesus in us. 'Abba' is the intimate family word for 'father', equivalent to our word 'Dad'. It describes the loving comfort of a Dad, who always offers the best to us, and encourages His children to live as grown up sons and daughters, drawing on all the resources that our Dad in heaven has made available to His heirs.(4:1-7)

Turning back as a Christian is not so much backsliding into the ways of the world, but is returning to the religious rules from which the gospel was intended to set us free. Because when we try to live the Christian life by rules, God's presence seems very distant, we turn back to the regulation which we lived under as children when someone else organised our timetables. For the Jewish Christian this meant keeping the Sabbath and the annual Old Testament feasts.(Lev.23) A church calendar seems harmless enough but if Sunday, Christmas and Easter are the essential framework of our relationship with God, we have missed out on the simple joy of being directed inwardly by our heavenly Dad who knows how He wants His sons to spend each day.(4:8-11)

Paul reminds them how excited they were to receive his message of grace when he first came to them despite his physical condition which might have put them off. How great it would be to see that excitement return! Grace is good news and those who bring it are welcome, but rules are not. Other preachers had come with bad news of regulation so their excitement had faded. The purpose of such teachers is to make us dependent upon them.(4:12-18)

He compares his present sorrow for them as being like a mother in labour, as he urges them to begin again to be sons of God rather than slaves.(4:19-20)

He finally goes back to the story of Abraham to illustrate the two ways, of grace or Law. Abraham's marriage to his true wife, Sarah, produced a son, Isaac, who was everything Abraham ever wanted because in Isaac all God's promises to him were fulfilled. This was like depending on God's grace through Jesus Christ by which He gives us the very best. Unwisely Abraham also entered into a relationship with Hagar who produced Ishmael. This was like depending on ourselves to be able to fulfil the Law. There was always conflict between his two families. There will always be conflict between religion and its laws, and the grace of God which depends on God and not on us. We are so often jumping back and forth between Law and grace as Abraham had trouble making up his mind to which family he belonged. Paul compares Hagar to Mount Sinai where the Law was given, and then to Jerusalem whose people were still trying fruitlessly to keep that Law. Sarah by contrast is like the heavenly Jerusalem where Christians really belong as God's heirs.(4:21-31)

Review your section titles for chapter 4 before looking into the next chapter which continues the same theme. My suggestions for dividing chapter 5 are as follows:- verses 1-8; 9-12; 13-15; 16-21; 22-26.

Section 1 – (5:1-8)

Q.1 Paul compares returning to rules for living as being like a slave who has been set free choosing to return to slavery. What example does he use? What modern examples of returning to slavery after coming to know Jesus can you suggest?

Q.2 What effect on our relationship with Christ is there when we go back to rules, according to verse 4? How do those who love to make rules for others usually describe 'falling from grace'? How does Paul urge us to maintain our freedom? What practical difficulties do we encounter when we try to stay free?

Section 2 – (5:9-12)

Q.3 What does verse 9 mean?(I Cor.5:6-8; Matt.13:33; Lev.2:4) Give practical examples of how this problem develops and grows in our Christian lives and churches.

Q.4 What effect do those who teach the cross plus rules have on others? What will happen to those who enslave Christians? And what will happen to those who insist on preaching grace?

Section 3 – (5:13-15)

Q.5 How may our freedom as Christians be misused? What safeguard is there against this? How would this work in practice? How does this produce a very different result from the rules which some bring in to guard against the abuse of freedom?

Q.6 Look up the Old Testament reference in Lev.19:18. How does it demonstrate the true application of the law? How may people 'bite and devour one another'? What restrains them?

Section 4 – (5:16-21)

Q.7 What according to verses 16-18 are the two ways in which life may be lived? What will be the result of one or the other? How does this deal with the problem of freedom misused?

Q.8 Paul gives a list of the symptoms of slavery. In what way is each item inconsistent with loving our neighbour as ourselves? Are you surprised by what he includes and what he leaves out? Is it true that religious people can behave as described in verses 20,21?

Section 5 – (5:22-26)

Q.9 Why does Paul talk about 'fruit' rather than fruits? How does each characteristic of the Christian who is free, show love to our neighbours? What according to verse 24 do we have to do to live in freedom? What does a branch have to do to produce fruit?(Jn.15:4,5)

Q.10 How again in verses 25,26 does Paul present the two choices and what they look like in practice?