

The freeborn son

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Date: 05 November 2017

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[0:00] If you'd like to take your seats, we'll turn to this passage in a minute, let's just commit ourselves to the Lord again. Father, as we come to this passage of Scripture, perhaps not the easiest one to get our heads around, but we pray that we'll be illuminated in our minds and warmed in our hearts and encouraged in our spirit.

Through this word, we ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. implementing some parts of the Jewish law and perhaps claiming that all Christians had to be circumcised.

And we're picking up the argument which we've been looking at in some detail. And you remember that two weeks ago perhaps we looked at the question of isn't circumcision the most important marker of the covenant, that sign of God's favour.

And first of all Paul has to say no, the mark of the covenant is not circumcision, it's faith. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

But then the opposition might have said well okay, that's true but circumcision was given to Abraham after he believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

[1:57] So does that not mean that we all have to, still have to all be circumcised indeed as an act of faith as perhaps one might say.

And Paul's argument against that was quite extreme, perhaps might be the right word to put it, quite surprising because his argument if you remember in chapter 3 is that actually there is only one seed of Abraham.

Abraham was promised that his seed would bless all nations. and he says actually there is only one seed and that seed is the Lord Jesus Christ. But then he goes on to say but all the church, all the Christians are one in Christ Jesus.

Notice what he says, one in Christ Jesus. In other words, they are included in that seed. Included in other words, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And particularly, therefore, we no longer needed to be circumcised because there only needed to be, if there's only one seed, there only needs to be one circumcision.

[3:09] And like all the other things, rituals of the law, that finds its fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ who was cut off as it were and therefore the mark of, is marked by circumcision.

But you might then go on to say, well okay, does that mean that Christians can do what they like then?

That, you know, these, doesn't really matter what you do because we're all included in the Lord Jesus Christ anyway. And so, does the law have any relevance to us? Are there any moral imperatives that we have to stick to?

Paul takes a whole two chapters really to answer that question. First of all, he carries on with the theology and that's what we're going to be looking at tonight.

And I'm afraid tonight in one sense it's going to be a bit thin on application because the application of this teaching is really in chapter 5 which Ben is going to pick up on in a couple of weeks and how we live by the Spirit.

[4:17] But, first of all, we'll look at Paul's actual argument here. and his argument basically is that you need to be adults.

We've quoted that verse this morning, didn't we? Be children in Israel, in evil, but in your thinking, be adults.

And Paul has the same argument here. But remember, as I said, it all depends on the fact that we are all included in Christ and hence, through him, we are all co-inheriting sons.

And it doesn't matter whether you're a slave or a free, it doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman, it doesn't matter whether you're ethnically Jew or Gentile. If you're included in Christ, then you are a son in the sense a firstborn son, a son who inherits the estate because we're all included in Christ in that way.

And in today's passage, Paul goes on to sort of explore and develop the idea and bring out some implications of it. And then, as I say, in chapter 5, he goes on to say how it all works out and what does that mean in practice.

[5:37] So you'll have to wait two weeks for Ben to bring that part of it. But let's look at the theological argument here. And the passage fairly obviously divides into three sections.

You can't really argue with the NIV's headings here. The passage clearly divides into those three sections. First of all, what it means to be adopted as a son in verses 1 to 7.

And then he talks about, well, that being the case, why would you want to go back? And then we have this sort of allegory of Hagar and Sarah or of Mount Sinai and Mount Zion and the slave city and the free city, which is the third section.

So we'll use that division and just look at these arguments as they go. So first of all, we remind ourselves that Jesus has inherited the promise given to Abraham and that we are included in that and we remember that God is one, chapter 3, verse 20, and Father, Son, and Spirit are all involved in this adoption process.

And we remember that the fatherhood of God was a key theme of Jesus' teaching. If there's one doctrine that Jesus introduced that was much less prominent in the Old Testament, it is the doctrine of the fatherhood of God that we can call God Father, Abba, almost Daddy.

[7:21] Jesus taught that not only that we are to think of God as our Father, but that like any family, there should be a family resemblance. So for instance, in Luke chapter 6, verses 35 and 36, we read the following.

Jesus said, love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Well, why would you want to do that? He says, that your reward will be great, but the reward is that you will be sons of the Most High because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked, and so be merciful just as your Father is merciful.

There should be a family resemblance if we are sons of God in this sense. And Paul is basically exploring the same theme here, although he takes a slightly different slant on it.

So in verses 4 and 5, he just reminds what he'd said previously, he reminds us that all the legal requirements have been met.

The adoption is official. All the paperwork has been signed, as we might say, and it's all been to the judge, and it's all been proclaimed, yes, you are genuine sons.

[8:43] You are now entitled to inherit all that the Father has. So he reminds us of that in verses 4 and 5. In fact, but before that, even in verses 1 to 3, he reminds us that he introduces the idea that we should really be adults now, spiritual adults.

That's what he's saying here, isn't it? As long as the heir is a child, he's no different from a slave, even though he owns the whole estate. Yes, I mean, in a sense, he owns the estate, but he doesn't actually have control over it himself.

He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world.

And so, the meaning here, obviously, is that now all the paperwork has been signed, now all the trust has come to maturity, as it were, then you no longer need trustees, guardians, and you're no longer back in these elementary principles.

People argue exactly what is meant by these basic principles of the world, and the commentators argue about it. It seems to me here that I personally go along with the view that it's talking about ABC.

[10:23] That's one possible meaning of the elements, just as we talk about the elements of geometry, or the element, just as you have a textbook that says the elements of something, then it's the introduction.

It's, if you like, it's the theology 101. It's the elementary thing. And he's saying, but now you've graduated from that, now you are inheritors in Christ.

As a child, we learn the basic print rules of ABC, don't we? Nowadays we learn grammar. I learned grammar as a child, and for a lot of time people stopped learning grammar, but now of course you go back to learning grammar.

Our grandsons learned grammar, whereas our children largely didn't. You learn ABC, you learn the alphabet, you learn grammar. But you don't become a good expressive writer, you don't become a Shakespeare, do you?

By consciously focusing on these elementary principles. You have to learn them, but they need to become internal, don't they? They need to become part of you.

[11:40] And I suspect that that's what Paul's getting at here. It's not that you actually abandon these principles when you grow up, but as I say, they need to become internal to you.

It's like when you learn to ride a bike, isn't it? At first, when you learn to ride a bike, you concentrate on balance and steering and brakes and stuff, and it's really quite hard to do.

And if you're not careful, you're so concentrating on that that you get run over or knocked off by a car or something because you're not looking where you're going. But once you've practiced a bit, these things become instinctive and natural and almost as if they're hardwired into you.

And as we say, you never forget how to ride a bike. You could, I guess, I got on a bike a few years back. I probably hadn't ridden one for 10, 15 years, but it didn't take me very long to get the hang of it again because once you've learned, you don't forget it.

And these elementary principles are designed to become part of you, not sort of rules to keep. And I think that's probably what Paul is getting at here. He says, now you should be graduates.

[12:54] You no longer need your elementary tutors. And Paul wrote in Romans, didn't he, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good pleasing and perfect will.

These rules, as it were, need to become internal to you.

Your mind has to be, has to absorb them, as it were. Your mind has to be transformed by them, Paul tells us. And then you will understand what God's will is.

And I suspect this is what Paul is getting at here, that we need to be graduates. But that does have an implication. A slave or a child, of course, has to do what he or she is told.

Paul said in chapter 3, verse 23, the law was like a schoolmaster. And now he says much the same thing again. As long as the heir is a child, he's no different from a slave.

[14:02] But a free adult, once the time has come that was set, a free adult must decide for themselves. But that doesn't mean to say that they decide in a way that is contrary to what their father wanted.

Rather, they must decide in a way that because they've absorbed the principles that their father has given them. So, Paul is saying here that you need to have what God requires, not on the outside, but on the inside.

That very much reflects Jesus' teaching, doesn't it? It's not what goes into you that makes you unclean. It's what comes out is what makes you unclean. And these things have to be inside us. The law has to be written on our hearts, not just on our foreheads as the Jews sometimes did carry it around on their foreheads. And if that's the case then, Paul says, why would you go back to the elementary principles?

But of course, there's always a temptation to do that, isn't there? There was always a bit of Peter Pan in all of us. That we'd rather not have to grow up.

[15:31] There's a certain nostalgia, isn't there, for the apparent securities and certainties of childhood. If you don't grow up, you don't have to make your own decisions.

As I say, there's a certain nostalgia for that. There's a yearning for the safe environment of the nursery. But the real world, of course, is not a safe environment.

And the Peter Pan option is not a good choice. That's probably what the Jews were thinking, what the circumcision party were thinking. We need to go back to something we can see, something that is external, something that's imposed on us.

But Paul's saying, no, that's no longer, now you're grown up, now you're, the son is, the Lord Jesus is inherited and you're enclosed in, incorporated in Jesus.

Then you need to be like adults and these things have to be in your heart. And it's not a matter of things you can see, it's a matter of what is in your heart and what comes out.

[16:46] And why wouldn't you go back? Well, for one thing, Paul points out, it involves a return to captivity. If you go back to being a child, then you go back also to the restrictions of childhood, to the fact that you have to go out, you can't go out on your own.

You have to go out with a tutor or a guardian or a nanny or something. You can't go out on your own if you're a child. And secondly, it actually rather misses the point of what you learned in childhood.

Because as I say, you don't want to go back to those basic rules of grammar and alphabet. Rather, what you want to be doing is using those principles in the real world, in a creative way, not in the, as it were, restricted environment of the nursery.

But out there in the real world. So that's the second reason why you shouldn't go back, is because going back requires you to go back to those basic principles, the ABC, as it were.

Hebrew says very much the same thing, doesn't it? It says you should now be on mature food, but I'm having to feed you milk. And the third reason that Paul gives, and this is the one that really upsets him, I think, is that it requires you to reject the teachers of your maturity and to go back to the primary school.

[18:14] And that's what Paul is saying in verses 11 to 17, isn't it? He says, when I came, you received me with joy. This was a message of liberty.

This was a message you received as if it was from an angel, or indeed if it was from the Lord Jesus Christ himself. God's message of the But now you seem to be rejecting that. You're rejecting me, Paul says, as a teacher.

But if you're rejecting me as a teacher, you're rejecting the things I brought you. And if you're going to do that, then you are going back to being a child, to being a slave.

They'd welcomed him once in verse 14 as a very messenger from God. But now, in verse 16, he seems to have become their enemy. And he doesn't really understand why that should be the case, and he's certainly very troubled by it.

He's telling you the truth, making you my enemy. And then he goes on to talk about the false teachers, doesn't he?

[19:25] And if you are a primary school teacher, of course it's good to be zealous for the rules of grammar. But not if you regard those things as ends in themselves.

And he says this, doesn't he, in verse 17. These people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you from us so that you may be zealous for them.

They want to turn you against Paul and his gospel of freedom in the Lord Jesus Christ. What you're aiming, if you are a primary school teacher, is to produce Shakespeare's, isn't it?

Produce people who can really write in a creative way, not people who can just recite the rules of grammar. You wouldn't criticise an English graduate for saying, you know, being into creative writing rather than just taking off the rules.

And a true teacher of children rejoices to hear that their ex-pupils are built on their foundations to achieve something greater. teacher. I can't remember who it was, but there was a well-known mathematician who used to say of his research students that first they were my students and then they were my colleagues and then they became my teachers.

[21:03] And that is surely what any teacher is hoping to do in that sense. That they should exceed what their teachers have said, not to be suppressed by it.

And that's what Paul wants here. He wants them to make progress, not to go back. And then I suppose in verse 19, Paul tracks their regression back to its logical conclusion.

If they're so keen to return to childhood, maybe they ought to go back to babyhood and start all over. And so he says, I feel I'm in labor pains again for you.

As if you need to go back to being babies. You want to go back, then you've got to go back and be a baby and start again. So are you going to go back to babyhood or are you going to go forward to maturity?

And then Paul goes into full rabbinic mode. So he's got the scholars of the sort of second temple Judaism and the like tells this is very much the way the rabbis of the time used to argue.

[22:26] And he's got this idea of motherhood still in mind clearly because he says, you know, he said, I feel I'm in labor pains again.

And so he comes and thinks about this idea of motherhood. Who actually is your spiritual mother? And as I say, he goes into full rabbi mode here.

So using history, interpreting history as allegory, which is a dangerous thing to do in some ways perhaps, but here it makes sense.

And in fact, he makes use of a convenient fact. And that is that the Mosaic law, the law of Moses, of course, was given at Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai isn't in the promised land at all.

In fact, it's in Arabia. And traditionally, Arabia is the territory of Hagar, the slave woman, and of her son Ishmael. Hagar was Sarah's slave.

[23:31] And if you're not familiar with the story, what happened, Sarah feared she was unable to bear children herself. So she gave Hagar to Abraham to have a child, which she indeed did.

And the child was Ishmael. And as Paul says, the child was born in the ordinary way. But this wasn't the child who would inherit the promise.

Sarah did not bear children in the ordinary way. She was, it says rather euphemistically, she was past the way of women. In other words, she was post-menopausal. And so apparently, she couldn't bear children.

And yet eventually, she did have a son. And that son was the child of promise. And at first, the two boys grew up together, if you read the story in Genesis.

But eventually, Ishmael came to resent Isaac. And Hagar and her son had to be banished from the family, as it says in verse 30. Why was that?

[24:35] Well, because the son born naturally cannot happily coexist with the son born by the spirit. And that's the point that Paul is trying to make here in verse 29.

That the natural and the spiritual cannot coexist. They're either child of natural or child of nature, a child of the flesh, as Paul would have said, or a child of the spirit.

Are we a true child of Abraham, the true seed of Abraham, the child of spirit and promise? Or are we just a natural child by natural descent?

The true children of Abraham, those included in Christ, are those children who share Abraham's faith. That's the point he's making, of course. Those who are adopted as his children by faith and promise.

But then you notice if you read it, in fact the true focus of this allegory is not the two children at all. It's actually the two mountains. And you recall that often in this Hebrew style argument, the most important point is generally in the middle, not at the end as we tend to put it.

[25:55] And at the middle of this, we have this parallel between the two mountains. And Mount Sinai, I remember, was the place where the law was given. And indeed, it was the place where the whole Exodus enterprise very nearly unraveled.

It was the place where the Israelites rebelled and built the golden calf. We find that in Exodus 32. And Paul wants us to remind us that in fact it's not in the promised land at all.

It's located in the territory of the slave woman. And the mountain of promise was in the promised land. And the mountain of promise was Mount Zion, the mountain on which Jerusalem was built. And so because of that, Jerusalem on Mount Zion should have been the city of freedom, should have been the city of promise.

Freedom is always intimately connected with citizenship, isn't it? To live in a land, you have to be a citizen of the land. The law of the city either promotes the freedom of its citizens or if it's a bad law, it restricts it.

[27:07] It's not that freedom and citizenship are intimately related always. But what did we actually find?

That the law of Jerusalem, which should have promoted the freedom of its people, had actually sold them into slavery. And Paul doesn't even really have to resort to allegory here because that was the literal truth.

Jerusalem at that time was in slavery. It was in slavery to the Romans for a start. But that wasn't even the worst of it. The worst of it was that that very law of Moses, which should have united them and making them free, was driving them into different sects and different parties, each of them claiming to be the true heirs of the covenant, and was driving them into slavery to rules and regulations which they could not possibly keep, each trying to prove that they were better than someone else.

And this, and in fact, it was driving them to the very destruction that would overtake Jerusalem some, probably some 20 years after this letter was written.

But already at the time, it was clear that Jerusalem was not a free city at all. Jerusalem was a city in slavery, yes, in slavery to the Romans, but worst of all, in slavery to rules and regulations and sects that they really could not keep by doing them more harm than good.

[28:43] Jerusalem was becoming increasingly unstable and ungovernable. And so there was no freedom to be found on Mount Zion. And it seems that the promise had failed.

Mount Zion, Jerusalem, is in slavery. But that's not the truth, says Paul.

Because where is the true city of God? Where is the true city of promise? Who is the true mother? What is the true motherland of the freeborn?

Jerusalem. Not on a particular hill in Israel, in Palestine. But the true city is above.

The city where is it under the direct protection of God. And as he said, freedom and citizenship are inextricably linked. And the law of this city is the law that guarantees freedom.

[29:49] And as Paul, again, he's keen to make sure he hasn't just made this idea up. That it isn't something new. And so he quotes from Isaiah.

And I suppose he didn't have time to quote the whole chapter. And I'm not going to read the whole chapter. He just gives us a taster of it. But it's from almost the beginning of Isaiah, actually, in chapter 2.

And it says, In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains. It will be raised above the hills. And all the nations will stream to it.

I mean, it's clear from that alone. He can't be talking about literal Mount Zion, can he? And yet he goes on, actually, if you read the rest of Isaiah 2, which is worth reading. He goes on to talk about all the glory of the true Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem.

And this, of course, is all this imagery that's picked up in the book of Revelation. If you don't realize where it comes from, if you just read Revelation, a lot of it comes from Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 2. And so it's not an earthly city at all, but a heavenly one, which is the mother of those who are truly free, verse 26.

[31:07] It's the heavenly city, he says, that's our mother. Earthly, Jerusalem appeared to have many children, and the Lord as a husband, but in fact, the children of Abraham come from all nations, as Isaiah tells us.

And they gather not on a literal Mount Zion, but in the heavenly city. The children of the promise are far more numerous and diverse than the natural children could imagine.

Paul, who's hardly qualified as a man to be a natural mother, but he says that he's in labor, doesn't he? Labor pains for the Galatians in verse 19.

But the heavenly city is in labor for all her children. I noticed this verse 27, or which is from the quotation from Isaiah 2.

Let me just read it. Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children. Break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains, because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her own who has a husband.

[32:22] A woman in labor cries out. This woman is not, as they say, too posh to push. The woman cries out. And the cry of a woman in labor is a strange one, isn't it?

Because it's almost simultaneously a cry of pain and a cry of joy. And Isaiah says to the barren woman, one who appears to have no children, cry aloud.

Cry aloud as if you're in labor, but the cry is one of joy. The pain is almost a necessary part of the joy, isn't it?

Bringing a child into the world involves struggle, and from that struggle comes triumph. The heavenly Sarah, the heavenly Jerusalem, who is apparently barren, becomes through her struggle and faith the mother of many.

And it's the church of the firstborn. And where are the birth certificates kept of the church of the firstborn? Not at Somerset House, but we are told in Hebrews that the records are kept in heaven. [33:36] The book of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus himself, keeps the birth certificates of the church of the firstborn. Those born of the Spirit are born to freedom.

But it's not a freedom to do whatever you want, but rather to be what you should be, to be faithful citizens of the heavenly city. So that's the theology of it, and now I have to come to a stop, because otherwise I'll be saying the things that Ben is going to say in a couple of weeks.

So again, in a sense, there's not application of this, but the application is that the real freedom is to live by the Spirit as sons in the household of God.

We live by the Spirit, and Paul was going to address this, which Ben will bring us in a couple of weeks. But as I say, that's what Paul is teaching us here, that God's people are free, but not to be vandals, not to be those who destroy the city or go around breaking laws, but those who live freely as model citizens of the holy city.

Let me just refer you to one verse in chapter 5, which is verse 13. You, my brethren, were called to be free, but did not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, otherwise not as natural children, but rather serve one another in love.

[35:14] The entire law is summed up in a single command, love your neighbour as yourself. So I have to stop, otherwise I'll be doing Ben's sermon in two weeks. So let's remind ourselves of that glory of the heavenly city by singing John Newton's famous hymn, well-known hymn number 570, that reminds us, as Isaiah tells us, that the heavenly Jerusalem is a glorious city, a beautiful city.