

Freeing Grace

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[0 : 00] Now, if you would take a Bible out and open to page 178, Galatians 4. I think I've only ever once had the experience of being at the centre of the universe.

It was in Victoria Station in London, England, a couple of years ago. I didn't know where I'd come from and I didn't know where I was going. And I was in a scrum of about 10,000 souls from all around Europe, pressing forward to some television screens, trying to figure out where it was that I was going.

And as we pushed forward, rugby experience was helpful at this stage. As we pushed forward to the television screens, I found where I was going. But the array of destinations that you can go from Victoria was just incredible.

They had link trains through Paris to all over Europe. And I thought to myself, I do not want to go to the wrong platform. I will end up a long way from home.

I might find myself on the way to Australia, but I don't think I'll find my way back to Vancouver. Now, Galatians 4, 1 to 11 feels a little bit like that. This is like Victoria Station in the book of Galatians, where all the different rails and destinations come together.

[1 : 23] I can't think of a major Bible theme that is not picked up in these 11 verses. So I hope you brought a picnic lunch with you, because it covers the entire history of the world.

It covers Old Testament history. It goes back to creation. It talks about pagan religion. It deals with family relationships. What part money plays in our lives.

It deals with idolatry, slavery, spiritual experience, and a whole pile of other things that we don't have time for. The passage divides into three, and I've called it a stoicheia sandwich.

There are two bread buns, which I'm going to name stoicheia, and in the middle, there is the giving of the Holy Spirit.

But these two sides of this bread sandwich, I'm using this Greek word stoicheia. And I know you're not supposed to use Greek in sermons. But I thought that today you could go home feeling to yourself, well, we covered the history of the world, and we learnt a Greek word.

[2 : 33] Bully for us. I want to use that word because it's pivotal, and because it's very difficult to translate. We'll get to it in just a moment.

So let's look firstly at the first stoicheia. Is everyone with me? Verses 1 to 3 is the first stoicheia. And if you look down at those verses, what the Apostle Paul does is he covers the entire history of the Old Testament people of God.

He uses a slightly different analogy than the one he had done in chapter 3. He says it was like this. Imagine you're a boy or a girl who grew up in a wealthy home.

Some of us have done that. And you know that your life is divided into two stages. Before and after you turn 18. And get access to all the trust funds and the finances and all the good things that belong to you.

Before you're 18, you grow up and you're sent to school. You're under the care of guardians who tell you what to do and what not to do. And you're under the care of trustees who tell you you can't spend the money because it's not yours yet.

[3 : 42] And you cannot wait for the day when you turn 18. Is it 18 here in this country? When you move from being a minor to being an adult? I think that's true, isn't it?

And you can't wait for that day when the inheritance becomes yours. For all the time you're a child, you feel a bit like a slave. You do what other people tell you to do. You have to learn your ABCs.

Certainly you live in a nice home and you have nice holidays. But you are constantly reminded that the day is going to come when all those nice things will belong to you. The apostle says that was our position as the people of Israel before Jesus Christ came.

We were under the instruction of the law. We were in school studying ABCs. We were waiting for the day when we turn 18 and take possession of everything. Look at verse 3, please.

So with us, he says, when we were children, we were slaves under the stoicheia of the universe. Here is the first reference to stoicheia.

[4 : 42] And the word literally means the ABCs, the basic elements. What is rudimentary, fundamental bedrock stuff? And different Bibles translate it different ways.

Ours calls it elemental spirits. The New International calls it the basic principles of the world. The King James, the elements of the world. And in this first reference, the apostle Paul is speaking about all the law that God gave to his people Israel.

And the reason that God gave the law was to teach his people the ABCs, the spiritual realities of the world in which we live. I've had a wonderful time in the last two weeks reading the book of Leviticus. I urge you to do so. It is a massive object lesson from God about the spiritual fundamentals of the world where everything, physical and non-physical, is charged with spiritual significance and meaning.

From how you harvest your field to how you cut your hair. From how you deal with physical bodily ailments to what kind of foods you can eat. From sexual ethics to how to celebrate certain days and seasons.

[5 : 57] In the book of Leviticus, as God gives the people the law on Mount Sinai, he is teaching his people that everything in the world is placed in relation to him.

That this world is charged with what is clean and unclean and holy and unholy. And that things can move between those categories and they can become polluted and unholy by sin. And they can move back to being clean and being holy only by one way, and that is through the sacrifice of a life. And the whole edifice of sacrifices of bulls and goats and sheep and birds and grain and all that sort of thing was a daily, physical, visceral reminder of the deadly effects of sin.

The costly requirement of forgiveness. And here's the thing for us living in the 21st century. that there is nothing intrinsically unclean about eating pork or eating owls or eating prawns.

But God set those things in the law in that way to teach a deeper lesson. The law was given to Israel as a kind of class, a physical laboratory, a lesson which would last 1400 years.

[7 : 12] instructing Israel about the fundamentals of life and holiness of sin and salvation. It's not that Christianity is more advanced than the Old Testament religion.

It's not that the Old Testament believers were any less than we were and we are. But they were under the instruction of the law, longing for that day when they'd turn 18 and come to inherit all that they received.

And Brom and I are learning French. And we are in a class of people who are nearly as embarrassed as we are trying to relearn what we learned at high school.

French is taught in Australia, I should let you know. And we actually had a French teacher when I was about 14 who'd grown up in France.

He'd come for an exchange for three months and we decided to pronounce every French word with as broad Australian an accent as we possibly could. And he left a disappointed and failed man.

[8 : 16] However, I just remember him putting his head on the desk. Oh no, no. The teacher who is teaching us this time around says, you know how you learn your verb conjugations?

You say them over and over and over by rote. And I know it feels a bit silly, but it points to the moment when Brom and I will one day be in France and someone will actually ask us what our names are.

And I'll be able to answer. You see, this is the purpose of the law.

Whenever somebody in Israel ate unclean food or touched a dead body or sinned, they would go to the priests. The priest would confess their sins over an animal.

The animal would be executed so that their sins would be covered and atoned for. And they longed for the day when God would bring a monumental sacrifice of monumental worth so that they would be released from being under the ABCs, the stoicheia, and take possession of the spirit.

[9 : 22] That's the first stoicheia. I move to the second point, to the meat of the sandwich, which you're not allowed to say today. It's the protein-enriched flavoursome meat substitute in the sandwich.

It's the middle part of the sandwich. Verses 4 to 7. And in these verses, the Apostle Paul speaks about the most important event since the creation of the world, which was the day when Israel

turned 18 and took possession of what God had promised for them.

And Paul says God did two things. First, he sent his son. Verse 4. When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who are under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Our freedom began, Paul says, with a mighty substitution. We were under the law with a constant reminder of our weakness.

And Jesus Christ was sent by God to live under the law, the law we could not keep, to redeem us from under the law. He said the sending of Jesus Christ is a mighty miracle.

[10:39] He was sent from heaven, which means that he was God. And he was fully human, born of a woman, with all our weakness and temptation. And in Jesus Christ's perfect obedience to the law and in his sacrifice on the cross, you and I are redeemed from under the law.

And we're not just redeemed, it means that our entire spiritual reality and hope has been transformed and changed. That's the first thing he did. He sent his son. But secondly, God sent his spirit.

Verse 6 and 7. Because your son's God sent his spirit, the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. I'm very conscious this morning that I cannot begin to express how remarkable this is.

You know that Abba is the private, intimate word that Jesus Christ himself used when he spoke to God the Father.

It's a word that conjures up a special understanding of his loving, fatherly goodness towards us. And you see, in the death of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Spirit, God does not just secure our sonship, but he sends his Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we might experience, so that we might know and enjoy God as Father.

[12:10] This is the desire of God's heart. It has always been the desire of God's heart. It is why God made you and me. It is to have communion and friendship with us.

And he doesn't send his spirit into our hearts so that we will go off onto a new religious observance and come under another stoicheia. He does not just give us forgiveness.

He does not just take our sins away. He doesn't just give us righteousness, but he gives us the living reality of the Spirit of his Son living in our hearts so that we can cry out and know God as Abba Father.

All the purposes of God since the creation of the world are realized in this, the Spirit of Christ in your heart and my heart crying Abba Father. All that he has promised, all his purposes culminate, him dwelling within us.

You remember in the Genesis narratives when God made the world, the reason he created the world is not because he was bored and wanted something to do one day. He didn't want to create lesser beings so that he could rule over us.

[13:22] The reason he created us was because he desired communion with us and he set his love upon us and his desire since that day has been to be our God and for us to be his and his promise at the heart of the promise of God to humanity throughout the Bible is that he will dwell with us.

Augustine said, O Lord, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. That's why God chose Israel. That through the people of Israel he'd bring this blessing, this dwelling of God to all the world.

Let me read to you from the book of Leviticus. Don't turn to it. We're going to turn somewhere else in just a moment. This comes from Leviticus 26, verse 11. Here we are right in the middle of the giving of the law.

God says, I will make my dwelling among you. My soul shall not abhor you. I will walk among you. I will be your God.

You'll be my people. I'm the Lord who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the bonds of slavery. That's been God's purpose all along.

[14:38] And when Jesus was sent, he was sent under the law to rescue us from under the law. Not so that we'd be free to do whatever we want, but so that we'd be free to know him.

Our highest privilege, the ultimate purpose of your life and my life, is to know God and to call him Abba, Father. It is to have the Holy Spirit in our hearts crying passionately, intimately, constantly, Abba, Father.

And that is what it means to be an heir. That is what it means to be a Christian. This is something that nobody outside of Jesus Christ knows, but it is something that the person who has become a Christian for 30 seconds knows in their hearts.

The Holy Spirit begins to spread the fatherly love of God around in our hearts. And that is why true Christian faith is not just a mental thing. It's not just being able to say the creed or being able to say, I believe in God.

It's not even saying, I believe his word. It is directed to the person of God and it knows that he takes delight in me and he wants me for his friend.

[15:46] And he takes joy and gives to us eternal, unbroken friendship with himself. I'd like to spend more time here, but I must move on. Let's move on from the Spirit to the second stoicheia in verses 8 to 11.

And I hope you feel the disappointment as we leave this pinnacle of the Spirit and move to the stoicheia again. This is the point. Because the Galatians who received this letter had only recently converted to Christianity out of an entirely pagan background and now they are being tempted to turn back, to convert back to the Jewish law.

And I think the Apostle says things here in verses 8 to 11 that are almost too radical to believe. He says, if you go back to the law as the way of growing in the Spirit, you might as well become a pagan and worship pagan gods again.

Do you find that remarkable? He says, to come under the law again is the same thing as coming under the stoicheia. Let me read them for you again. Verse 8. Formally when you didn't know God, sorry, yes.

Formally when you didn't know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, the relationship again, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and poverty-stricken stoicheia, whose slaves you want to become again?

[17:18] You observe days and months and seasons and years, I'm afraid I've laboured over you in vain. Paul is saying that before the Galatians became Christians, when they were worshipping their pagan gods, they were under the stoicheia, a different form of stoicheia than Israel.

The pagans believed that behind every element there was a God, behind earth and moon and sun and water, and everything, if we worship it or if we hold it up as an object of worship, becomes a God, from nature to sea to sex.

And every religion has basic moral principles, kindness to neighbour, protection of the family, duty to society, and virtues. And those moral principles are reinforced by external religious observances, hours of prayer, religious festivals, going regularly to the shrine.

And do you know what the Apostle Paul calls that? He says that is being enslaved to non-gods. He says all the elevated, sophisticated, religious practices outside Jesus Christ, all the finest religious apparatus of moral teaching in the world, apart from the spirit of Christ, is slavery to the stoicheia. Because there is no God apart from God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's why Paul calls these stoicheia weak and poverty stricken. And I think that helps explain why sometimes people of other religions are ethically better than Christians.

[18:57] More generous, more law-abiding, more devout. It is to our shame that they are. However, that's entirely beside the point. The plan of God and the Christian gospel is not primarily about making us better people in this world.

It's not primarily about making us more religious. It's about redeeming us from under the law that we might walk with the spirit and cry out to God, Abba, Father. And I think the great temptation for us as religious people is to think that by external observance and obeying the rules, somehow through that we will get closer to God.

Somehow through doing these things, we will get more of the Holy Spirit. And when it comes to celebrating special seasons and observing days and months, which we do as Anglicans, if they become a necessary part of my worship of God and growth in God, I have become a slave to the stoicheia again.

Let me show you something. If you keep your finger in Galatians and turn right to Colossians 2 on page 188, here the apostle uses this word again, stoicheia, these ABCs, elements, in a slightly more radical way.

Look at verse 8, Colossians 2. Because you cannot come to know God as Father through all the religious observance in the world.

[20 : 33] The Holy Spirit does not come into our hearts through all the best moral effort that we can muster. Do you understand how radical this is? You can gather the finest religious practices of all world religions, all the best moral teaching that this world has ever produced, much of which we agree with and try and practice.

And Paul says the point of it, it has no revelatory power. It cannot bring us into relation with God. It cannot take away our sins. It cannot give us access to the Holy Spirit.

See to it, no one makes a prayer of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to the human tradition, according to the stoicheia of the universe and not according to Christ.

Verse 16. Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink and regard to festivals or new moons and Sabbath. These are only shadows of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Verse 20. If with Christ you died to the stoicheia, why do you live as if you still belong to this world? Why do you submit to regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things which all perish as they are used, according to the human precepts and doctrines?

[21 : 50] These indeed have an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity of the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.

See what he's saying? There's nothing wrong with rules. There's nothing wrong with religious observance. It's just that's not where the action is. There's nothing wrong with having a yearly religious calendar, as we do.

It's just that's not where the action is. These things have no power to mediate the Holy Spirit to us. And that's why, brothers and sisters, we cannot say to ourselves or to others, I need to celebrate Lent this year as some form of observance, nor can I say you must not celebrate Lent this year as some kind of non-observance.

You see? Both observing and not observing are impotent to provide the Holy Spirit to us unless they come out of faith. Let me give you a better example.

It's Jesus' example of prayer. You can look at two people praying and externally they look identical. Jesus says, for one person it's an exercise in self-righteousness and calendar keeping.

[22 : 59] But for the other it's an opportunity to cry, Abba Father, have mercy upon me. So you see, there are two different ways that we can put ourselves under these elemental stoicheia, back into slavery.

One is by idolatry and immorality and the other is by religion and morality. And the Apostle says, the Galatians are in great danger.

They're tempted by this moralistic, legalistic form of Christianity. You can be ethical, an orthodox, evangelical, with all your doctrines straight and still be just as enslaved to the stoicheia as the pagan who worships a tree, says Paul.

It is a devastating and radical truth. A great deal of Christian religious expression is actually idolatry, masquerading as the real thing.

Let's think this through just for a minute or two more. Let's think about this because anything that is to me essential, anything that gains a controlling interest of me, anything that I give my time and energy to effortlessly, that can be an idol.

[24 : 11] And idols are not terrible, wicked things that sins and idols are usually good things that have begun to take the place of God in my life. They can be farming or family or food or whatever.

But when the good becomes best, it becomes a deity and because it's not the true God, it becomes a demon because it's the integrating focus for my personality.

And that is why freedom cannot come from religious moral effort. It can only come from faith in Jesus Christ because whatever does not proceed from faith, is sin.

Let me finish with this word of encouragement to us from verse 9 in Galatians where the apostle says if you've placed your faith in Jesus Christ, you have come to know God or rather he says to be known by God.

That's wonderful. What really counts you see is not my knowledge of him but his knowledge of me, not my experience of him which is very important as we've just seen, but the fact that he set his love upon me.

[25 : 25] Christ was sent to be born under the law, to rescue us from under the law. Performance and effort, they now have no real value.

They don't rescue me from my idols. And what matters ultimately is what God thinks. And if I want to know what God thinks of me and if you want to know what God thinks of you, all we need to do is look at the cross.

My knowledge of God goes up and down and around and it's good one day and bad the next but God's is fixed, it does not go up and down. And the only thing that has the power to break my addictions to my idols is not my observance or my performance, the only thing is the spirit of Christ in my heart crying, Abba, Father.

because as that spirit of Jesus Christ raises my eyes and I begin to see Father, I begin to see how beautiful he is, I realise I don't need that idol.

When the Lord comes to us and says you're guilty, you failed again, we say Abba, Father. And when my idol comes along and says worship me, I say Abba, Father.

[26 : 39] Father, for God has given us his Holy Spirit by faith and he continues to give us his spirit by faith today and every day until we go and see him face to face.

Let's kneel and pray.