

Enslaved to Nothing

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Big Idea - In this life you are either enslaved to *nothing* or *enslaved* to nothing

Opening Illustration - The adopted slave

Over the past few weeks, we have talked about how the law functioned as a prison that condemned and imprisoned the Jewish people, but Jesus Christ came to fulfill the law that it could no longer bind the people. Not only was the law's prison doors opened, but its prisoners were adopted as sons of God through union with Christ. The very one who led to freedom led to adoption into the family of God! Those in Christ are freed from prison and accepted as children. Yet in today's passage we see the pastoral heart of Paul appear like a father who is concerned for a child putting themselves in danger.

A popular illustration throughout modern history has been

that of a slave who was adopted by his master as a son. This slave had been released from his bondage and made an heir of his former master. His new father gives him a room fully furnished room so that he can rest well in his new found freedom, but every night this adopted son sneaks out of his room back into the slave quarters to sleep on the floor. That is what the churches of Galatia are doing by turning back to the works of the law! And Paul, as a spiritual father reflects the heart of God towards them to plead that they live in the freedom that their adoption has given them.

You did not know; now you know (and are known)

Galatians 4:8–10 *ESV*

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years!

At this point in Galatians, we turn the page into Paul's pastoral heart for the people in the churches of Galatia. These are not strangers to Paul, but people to whom he had previously preached to during one of his missionary

journeys. As I spoke of previously, I believe there is good reason to think that these churches are the churches of Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium in what is modern day Turkey. Churches that Paul would have visited on his first missionary journey on his way to Ephesus.

You did not know God

Galatians 4:8 “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.”

Paul reminds these dear people that before you heard the Gospel, you had been enslaved by gods that are not real — those that by nature are not gods.

Let’s unpack what Paul is saying here about these things that by nature are not gods. Paul is likely referring to the prophetic writings of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah who each condemn false gods and idols as nothing. Jeremiah writes,

Jeremiah 10:2–5 ESV

Thus says the LORD: “Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer

and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.”

Let’s try to catch exactly what Jeremiah is saying here, what Paul is referencing: You who worship idols are worshipping an object that was made by human hands and is utterly powerless. You chop down a tree and carve the wood into an image and decorate that image with silver and gold. You set up that idol somewhere in your house and fasten it to the floor so that it won’t fall down or be stolen. They’re no different than a scarecrow in the cucumber field. They cannot speak, walk, or do anything. They are literally nothing, and yet you were enslaved to these meaningless “nothings.”

Now you have come to know God

Galatians 4:9–11 *ESV*

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Yet now you know God who is something. Not only is God something, God is being itself, the source of all being! Now that you have knowledge of God, your Creator and Sustainer, why would you turn yourselves back to the nothingness that you were previously enslaved to? Or rather, Paul puts, it is more accurate to say that it isn't that you know God or have knowledge of God, but that God knows you because all creatures intuitively have knowledge of their creator. Paul writes in Romans:

Romans 1:21-23 ESV

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Humans by their very nature as creature are aware of their Creator. It cannot be that one is freed through knowledge of one they already know but have forgotten. No, it is by the reality that they are known by God that they are enlightened and freed by the knowledge of God.

You are known by God

This language of being known by God is not a truth

statement about God's knowledge, but about God's choice. Paul writes regarding food offered to idols that:

1 Corinthians 8:2-3 ESV

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

We love God by putting our faith in Him and believing who He says He is. The word "known" for a Jewish author and audience references the Hebrew word "yada." Throughout the Old Testament, there is a close tie to God's knowing Israel, and Israel's belonging to God as the people of God. Being known reflects an intimacy of relationship.

Paul is highlighting that the people of Galatia are not saved because they discovered the good news of who God is, but they are saved because God did a work in their hearts to bring them to Him! It isn't knowledge of God that saves, it is being known by God through the power and work of Jesus Christ applied through the Holy Spirit that saves! Because God has known you, you have been freed from these elementary principles of the world!

Returning to the image of the adopted son, the Galatians are like orphans who had worked so hard to earn a place in society, but once they were adopted their security rested not what they could do but in their new family's commitment to them. The foundation of their freedom in

Christ wasn't that they found God, but that God found them. Freedom begins with God's initiative, not ours. And in our freedom, it would be foolish to return to our former orphanage. Yet that is what the Galatians risk doing, returning to the idols and false gods of their former lives, even if it is through returning to the law of the Old Testament.

These false gods that are nothing. Paul continues in his letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 8:4–6 ESV

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

We know that idols have no real existence. As Jeremiah said, idols are just powerless chunks of wood that we carry around. And in contrast to these beings of nothingness, we have “one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

God is the source of being

God the Father and God the Son are shown to be equal here (and while not mentioned in this verse, the Holy Spirit is also equally God and equally source and purpose). God is the source of all things because God is being itself. In speaking of the Word, who is Christ John the Apostle writes: “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” Throughout church history, and especially in the medieval church with theologians like Thomas Aquinas, the church understood God as being itself, and sin was understood to be a privation (a deficit or corruption) of that being. Idols are not God, and they have no being, they are literally nothingness made with human hands.

God is the purpose (telos) of being

And it isn't only that God is the source of all being, but God is the purpose, the end goal, for all that exists. In other words, when we live our lives for the purpose of anything else but for God, then we are living our life for nothing. Without God as the goal of our lives, our lives become meaningless through our enslavement to nothingness. So Paul urges the churches of Galatia to not enslave

themselves to a religious calendar as their source of meaning, but encourages them to live in the freedom of God who is their source of life, freedom, and meaning.

Paul's Personal, Paternal Appeal

Galatians 4:12-20 ESV

Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

Be Like me, I'm just like you

Galatians 4:12 ESV

Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

First, Paul starts off with “brothers”, a term of endearment. Unlike the false teachers who Paul has set aside as anathema and apostate, meaning they are lost and cursed by God, Paul still has hope for the Galatian people. Not only hope but a deep desire to see them return to sound doctrine and Christian living.

Second, Paul encourages them to be like him. Paul has given his life in pursuit of becoming like Christ and proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. A few times in the New Testament, we see Paul exhort his listeners to become like him. We must remember who Paul was and is now to understand the importance of his request. Paul was a Jew and a Pharisee, a strict observer and teacher of the law, and now, Paul lives like a Gentile and does life among Gentiles. Paul desires the Galatians to live freely as Paul lives now, not to become enslaved by living like Paul was under the law.

In Paul’s pleading with the Galatians, he reminds them of how they first met.

Freedom found in God’s providence

Galatians 4:12–16 *ESV*

Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have

become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?

In reminding the people how Paul first came to proclaim the Gospel to them, we see the freedom that Paul has in Christ that even in weakness, God is glorified. Maybe it should be said that especially in weakness God is glorified. Paul reminds his audience how they first met him. It wasn't through his intentional missions to their cities but by a sickness that resulted in Paul's appearing to them as one that could be scorned and rejected. Yet even in his sickness, Paul proclaims the Gospel, and the people in Galatia receive him as one sent by God, even as they would have received Christ himself!

Paul emphasizes the providence of God that it was by bodily ailment that he first proclaimed the word to them, and their welcome was so kind that he notes they would have given anything to aid him, even their own eyes. While some scholars argue that this points to the kind of physical ailment Paul was experiencing, many argue that this is simply a matter of speech to describe the extremity that the

people were willing to go to for Paul. Regardless of the kind of ailment we see Paul's words in Romans supported:

Romans 8:28 ESV

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

There is true freedom in trusting in the God of being! On the other hand, there is true slavery in being bound to the nothingness of non-being. Paul again returns to his plea for them, not as brothers but as spiritual children.

A Fatherly Desire for his kids' freedom

Galatians 4:17-20 ESV

They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

These false teachers use a classic technique of cults and predators: the false teachers attempt to separate their target from its source of safety — in this case, they strive to separate the Galatians from Paul and the Church of Christ.

The goal of this separation is not to better equip the Galatians to service of Christ, but it is to bolster themselves. They aim to build up themselves.

Paul is deeply concerned for the churches of Galatia because he feels personally responsible for them like a mother feels responsible for her child in the womb. Paul is concerned for the salvation of these people who are being lured away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ into a false gospel of works and slavery. Instead of remaining in the freedom of Christ, Paul fears that they are returning to the bondage of the law, enslavement to nothingness and death.

His desire is to be with them so his concern may not be read harshly but gently. He desires for the people to be enslaved to *nothing* and free in Christ instead of being *enslaved* to nothing and bound by the law.

Application

In this passage we see the danger of life apart from Christ. There are two options in this life, fulfillment and freedom in Christ or meaninglessness and slavery to nothingness. Freedom in Christ results in our concern not being so much about ourselves as for our neighbor. Paul was not sidelined by his sickness, but he was empowered in his weakness to preach the Gospel somewhere that he did not intend to

labor for the Gospel. In Paul's weakness through sickness, he experienced the freedom of God to love those who needed to hear the Gospel, and now that he has a relationship with them, he pleads like a father pleads with his son who is making a foolish and risky decision to reconsider his actions.

This pastoral image we see in Paul is one that every Christian should strive to live out. Paul says to imitate him, to be like him. We should be like Paul by living in freedom from the law in order to be more like Christ by laying down our lives for our friends. This requires investing in those whom reside around us: friends, family, neighbors, even strangers! Because this life matters, and this life is not all there is. We must learn to be longsuffering and patient like Paul to endure the hard work of evangelizing the lost and encouraging one another towards faithfulness until each of our races are complete and we are received finally into God's presence.

We are known by God, chosen as His own. As sons of God, we should seek to know our Father intimately through His Word and by His Spirit, and to help others do the same.