

women still suffer the most incredible prejudice in almost all, even so-called modern cultures. It is still radical to say that male and female 'are one in Christ'; they stand equally human before God and in need of their Saviour, Jesus Christ. That is the truth of Scriptures.

Recipients of God's blessings!

The crowning statement of this glorious passage of Scripture comes at the end (3:29). All who respond to Jesus Christ by faith are the true descendants of Abraham and the recipients of the promises God made to him. In the total context of the book of Genesis, what God did by choosing Abraham was to begin a process which would lead to the possibility that anyone could regain a right relationship with God, something which was broken by the 'fall' (Gen 3). Now, God chose to begin this process through Abraham because He had to show that His love was specific, constant, unfailing and non-judgemental. The trouble was that although the law had been given to Moses in order to help Abraham's descendant's grow as His people, the law was no substitute for the eventual salvation which was to come through the one descendant of Abraham who ultimately, was completely faithful to the Father. That is, Jesus Christ.

There was no reason why God's new people, the church, should go back to dependence on the law. Christ alone was sufficient for salvation, and a mature relationship with the Father.

Application

How easy it is for us to read all this, agree, and reckon that we have no more obligation to the scripture. The closer we look at this passage, the more it reveals problems in the church today. You will have spotted a few that I have chosen to highlight by way of illustration as I have discussed this passage. One or two more are worth considering because they are important.

You may well come across some Christians today who insist that the Jews are God's special chosen people, and they should therefore receive special attention from the prayers and affection of the Christian Church. It is of course true that the Jews are God's chosen people even though the Jewish people to this day are those who have rejected Jesus Christ. We should be careful, however, because the New Testament insists that there is neither 'Jew nor Greek' before Almighty God. So any interest group which seeks to promote the state of Jewish people worldwide is indeed a worthy subject, but not, before God, in advance of any other Gospel or mission interest. The Jews are God's special people because having rejected the Saviour, God has indicated that He will somehow bring them to glory, but that is far beyond our competence or knowledge. We must stick to Scripture; there is no distinction in Christ Jesus.

I close with a comment about baptism. There are many quite disparate practises of baptism today, and each new church feels that it can develop its own practices according to the circumstances and cultural needs of the people to whom it ministers. We do well to notice the many features of baptism which the New Testament indicates as helpful indicators of the truth of our transformation in Christ. One of these is the practice of being clothed with a white garment after baptism to signify being 'clothed' by Christ. As well as providing a powerful illustration of what Christ means to us, doing this links us together with people of the past, even people of the earliest days of the Christian church, for whom this was a very special part of their entry into the church. We are one in Christ across time, as well as culture.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do we mark the differences between childhood and adulthood today?
2. Discuss what it means to you to be 'sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus'.
3. What forms of human inequality should be exposed by the Gospel today, and how?

Discipleship

What does it mean to you to be 'clothed' by Jesus Christ? Consider the different things which make up your daily life, and ask the question, how is Jesus involved with me in all this? The question is difficult to answer, but from time to time, it is one we need to consider. It is also helpful to check this out with a friend, a husband or a wife. Consider how a garment you wear is with you all day long and is itself affected by what you do, or consider how what you wear relates to your work or leisure. There are many ways of approaching this task.

Final Prayer

Your love, O Lord, draws me onwards, through the fears and doubts, the trials and temptations of life. Your love draws me to the Cross where, inexplicably, I have nothing left to give You from my mind or my heart; I am empty before You. But in Your love, You fill me up with resurrection joy and happiness! All praise be to You, O Lord most High! AMEN

Prayer

Great Lord and Father, everything that is good within this world comes from You. Help us, therefore, not to be afraid of anything that can happen to us, even to the point of death, for we know that through Jesus Christ all fear may be overcome. In Him, all our enemies are defeated; so may our praises never cease, and our songs of worship never ending! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Local Shops

What does the presence or absence of local shops near your home say about the nature of your community? Pray for those who run shops as small businesses, and pray about the pressures under which they live. Pray that local Christian people might actively support those shops which offer important facilities for certain groups of people such as the elderly.

Meditation

The politician works to organise and control the world.

But Christ knows the real path of history;
He deals with the evil which ruins our world.

The economist gives advice based on financial projections.

But Christ knows the true value of everything;
He holds the future in His hands for us to see.

The entrepreneur seeks opportunities to generate wealth.

But Christ is the source and the destiny of wealth;
He gives everything away with incomparable love.

The celebrities believe they have conquered the world.

But Christ alone knows how true victory is won;
He is known by the Cross throughout the world.

The 'great' people we meet today are only transient,

But Christ is forever. His love will never end;
He defines true fame through the Resurrection!

Bible Study - Galatians 3:23-29

²³ Now before this faith came we were confined by the law, held captive until faith would later be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was like our minder until Christ came, so that we could be justified by faith; ²⁵ but now that faith has come, we are no longer under the discipline of a teacher, ²⁶ for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise.

Review

Paul continues to give examples of the relationship between law and faith, which is the main thrust of this part of his letter. This passage begins with two illustrations of life under the law, firstly imprisonment and secondly that of a 'minder' responsible for the discipline of a child. Both examples present obvious possible conclusions for the life of faith, firstly freedom and secondly 'growing up'. However, when Paul begins to describe the meaning of real mature faith in a positive way, probably for the first time in his letter to the Galatians (all the previous explanations of faith being the result of his attacks on the Judaisers), he speaks with power and inspiration. From verse 26 to the end, Paul writes a series of short, pithy statements about what it means to have faith in Christ Jesus; each of which are of profound importance to Christians individually, and also to the life and practice of the church.

The first of these is the powerful statement 'you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus'. Faith has made the difference between the young child and the young adult (3:26) so that the Christian, according to what Paul says here, has a mature relationship with God the Father; not a relationship bound by rules and regulations, but one of faith and trust built on love.

Following this, Paul talks about the ceremony of baptism which marks the transition from non-believer to a man or woman of faith; he likens the ceremony to being 'clothed' with Christ. There is enormous power in this picture of all encompassing faith and the ever present power of Christ which Paul does not explore here, but which is found elsewhere in his writings (Rom 13:14, 1 Cor 15:53, Col 3:12). Alongside baptism it emphasises the sense of complete commitment and the life-changing consequences of having faith in God through Christ Jesus.

In verse 28, Paul continues in the same positive way, confirming a principle of faith which is so fundamental, it is profoundly shocking to almost every civilisation and culture which humanity has ever created or dreamt up. Paul's words; 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (3:28) state the principle of the universal equality of humanity before God. It is too easy for us to look at these words and regard ourselves as 'covered' because the constitution of our own country (hopefully) embeds these rights, but Paul is not talking about rights. He is talking about the reality of the standing of all individual people before Almighty God. In his own day, issues of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, were pertinent (as they remain in some cultures today). But the principle Paul speaks of means that every form of inequality and injustice between people is intrinsically wrong in the eyes of God. The one inequality which glaringly defaces the image of God today, for example, is the gap between rich and poor. By this, I mean that a tiny number of super-rich people in the worlds of industry, finance and politics, control the lives of almost everyone else on the planet. This is not a conspiracy theory (I wish it were just this!) but a commonly accepted truth which is an affront to God. Now, each of the inequalities mentioned by Paul are important, because degenerate humanity always falls back into racism, sexism and the manipulation of the poor in slavery; but we must also see how the principle of equality before God needs to be applied now.

Paul's conclusion is that those who have faith are all 'one in Christ Jesus' (3:28), and as such, we are the true descendants of Abraham, and heirs of God's promises of blessing and peace with God our Father. We are made right with God not through the law, but by faith. As people of faith, we therefore have to uphold the highest standards of God's morality.

Going Deeper

We have only just scratched the surface of this passage. It is rich with meaning, and almost every word offers us a route into a deeper understanding of what is by any measure, a stunning passage of scripture. One of the reasons why it is so important is because it draws together so much of what has lain dormant within Paul's writing whilst he has been attempting to demolish the case of the Judaisers. Let loose from that intellectual struggle, Paul's reflections are set free to express the profound truths of the Gospel.

Freedom from being held captive

In verse 23, Paul uses two verbs to describe his first illustration of the law. The first of these is translated 'confined' but comes from a Greek word ('phroureo') which was usually used for the setting of a guard to watch over someone or something. So, for example, after Paul had been converted and incurred the wrath of the Jewish community in Damascus, a guard was placed on the city to keep Paul in it, and prevent him from escaping (2 Cor 11:32, Acts 9:24); he only managed to escape by being lowered down from the city wall in a basket at night! Perhaps Paul had such experiences in mind as he explained faith to the Galatians!

The second word translated 'held captive' (Greek 'sungkleiow') means shut in or enclosed in a general sense, for example, trapped as fish in a net. By using this word, Paul exposed the obvious about Judaism; Jewish people regarded themselves as separate from others, and not equally part of the 'human race' with others. For them, the law revealed by God was part of their history, and they had developed it to define their own culture as distinct from all others. Unwittingly, they had placed themselves not, as they thought, within God's love, but inside their own exclusive, cultural prison. We should not ignore the implication of what Paul says which is that defining a religious system according to laws and regulations cuts people off from one another, and as not what God wants for His people in Christ. The only way out of this is through the freedom of faith in Christ Jesus which is open to all people, as are the out-reaching arms of God the Father, and the offer of a place in His kingdom.

Released from the minder

In contrast to those who are entrapped by the law, Paul describes all those who have faith as 'sons of God' (3:26), and I have translated this using the word 'sons' rather than 'children' because the Greek word used here means a son who had grown up and is no longer in need of being guarded or watched over as a little child. As we will see (later) this is not a 'sexist' issue

which precludes girls or women, but a way of describing the eternal relationship of a man or woman with God the Father. In our language today, it would be more correct to interpret Paul as saying that by faith we have an adult relationship with God.

The word for 'minder' which I have used is also a little controversial; in Greek it is 'paidagogos', which is sometimes translated 'teacher', but the ancient concept of 'teacher' was not the same as today's; in those days the teacher's prime responsibility was to instruct a young child in the disciplines of life, not to impart knowledge. Knowing this, it is obvious that Paul's intention was to show that the law was like a disciplinarian teacher for the infant people of God; but as Paul says in verse 24; 'the law was like our minder until Christ came'. Now He has come, Christ is not our teacher, in the sense that his teaching sets before us a code of conduct, He is our Saviour. He has died so that we might be free to have faith in Him and therefore have a mature relationship with the Father. All who have faith in Christ Jesus are 'sons of God' (3:26)

Baptised and clothed in Christ

This whole train of thought surrounds the idea of change from the infant to the adult, and from the Jew to the Christian. So Paul puts these two together in a rather fascinating way. Firstly, and naturally, Paul likened what he was talking about to baptism, because this was the act, by the command of Christ, which symbolised a person's entry into the Christian life, the change from the bondage of the law to the freedom of faith in Christ Jesus. Here, Paul's thought is very similar to that found in Romans 6:3-11, which contains a fuller explanation of the meaning of baptism as symbolising the death and resurrection of our Lord.

Secondly, Paul talked about being 'clothed' with Christ. What Paul had in mind was this. When a young boy entered manhood at the age of about 12 or 13, he was allowed to wear for the first time the full garment of a man, rather than a child. This was something like a 'toga', a cloth which draped all around the body. We can imagine what it felt like for a young boy to wear the adult toga for the first time! But this was what it was like to become a Christian, said Paul!

Now we know that at some point in the life of the early church, when people were baptised, they were clothed with a white cloth like a toga just after they were baptised in order to signify that they had become a new person, and their life was now bound up with Christ. It is uncertain when this practice took hold, though some would say that it happened independently of Paul, it is at least worth considering that the practice began as a practical expression of what Paul wrote both here and in his other writings about baptism, such was the influence of his letters.

United in Christ before God

Verse 28 speaks for itself, in many ways, and I have already mentioned some of the important consequences of what it says. Primarily for the letter to the Galatians, however, Paul's conclusion drawn from everything he has said in this chapter of his letter, is that once freed of the boundaries and enslavement of the law, and its false distinctions before God who loves all people, 'there is neither Jew nor Greek ...' It is as if Paul attacks the Judaisers in the churches of Galatia by raising the game higher and higher. For Paul, this is not a little local difficulty in resolving the nature of the church; it is a fundamental principle to do with the nature of God and salvation. All stand before God in need of a Saviour, and Jesus Christ, although he is a Jew, is nevertheless God's means of Salvation for all.

Paul talked next about the division between 'slave and free', and certainly, slavery was a terrible feature of the Roman Empire and something which the Jews abhorred. What Paul did, however, was not to try and capitalise on this as an issue which divided Jew and Gentile (which it undoubtedly did), but simply insist upon the rightness of the principle. He knew, as we all do, that unless people generally accept the principle that all are equal before God, then there will always be those with wealth and means who take advantage of the poor to enslave them. Even today, despite anti-slavery laws in almost every country, widespread slavery is practiced because people think that they can get away with it due to their wealth or criminality, and behind closed doors if necessary. This can only be altered by changing people's hearts, and the way to do this is through the proclamation of the Gospel which holds every man and woman as equal before God. Human sentiment is not enough to change this evil.

Finally, Paul says something which would have stood out above almost everything else in the whole paragraph. He said that in Christ, there is 'neither male nor female'. Well, you may have been led to think that Paul was endemically sexist in his attitudes, largely because of a few parts of his letters which express his views about the place of women in the church. Few people properly understand the cultural issues Paul was dealing with, however, and all too often, we fail to realise that much of what Paul said was profoundly liberating for women in his own day. Few cultures today can claim to look down on Paul on the issue of sexism, for the evidence is that