

At the end of the passage, Paul sounded quite distressed. He had attempted to lift the debate to higher things and appeal to the Galatians spirituality, faith and trust in Jesus Christ as their God and their redeemer. But he was haunted by the picture of these once enthusiastic Christians 'turning back again' to the past and the mockery this made of the true faith. Paul's phrase in verse 9 'how can you turn back again' to the weak and worthless basic spirits and seek, moreover, to be their slaves once again' is full of pathos. By agreeing to the arguments of the Judaisers that Jewish Law should be accepted as part of Christian faith, it appears that some had argued that other pagan practices were just as valid if they did not obviously conflict with the ethos of Christian faith in general! Verse 10 is proof that this was on Paul's mind. We would not necessarily spot this from what he said, which was; 'you observe days and months and seasons and years' but the observing of such times and seasons was a common feature of the many religious systems in Roman times (as it was, to a degree, in Judaism, with its feasts and festivals). Paul continued; 'I am fearful that my work for you has in some ways been wasted.' He shows utter despondency that Christian people would feel a need to fill some void in their spiritual life with something other than Christ. He was not happy!

### Application

There are two sides to this passage. Firstly the positive Paul who speaks fluently and enthusiastically about the things of God, in particular the way in which all people can become sons of God the Father by adoption through Jesus, and the witness of the Holy Spirit that this is so. Secondly, we catch a further glimpse of the negative Paul, upset and almost angry at the way in which the Gospel has been messed up by people who have a religious agenda which seems all right on the surface and yet does nothing but mislead people.

There is probably not one of us who does not weep with Paul over the amazing array of religious practices with which people surround their faith in Jesus Christ. In centuries past, Christians have attempted to get rid of the religiosity they have found around them in many different ways, and have sometimes created new churches, each of which, over time, has built its own restrictive religiosity which has quite often flown in the face of the founding principles of that church. It is very depressing. On the other hand, each of us are witnesses to the on-going work of God by which people are saved and Christian people rediscover their faith and are rejuvenated by the power of the Holy Spirit! There is no doubt; where people are reborn by the Spirit of God (John 3:1-10) and by that Spirit cry 'Abba, Father', then the church of God is alive and active, whatever denominational church structure is supported by God's people.

The churches of God will be released from standing under the judgement by God when they start to demonstrate that their priority is the proclamation of the Gospel by word and deed, in unfettered unity with all others who are adopted as the 'sons of God' and enjoy the same privileges of God's grace. When their priority is Christ and Christ alone and their mission is His mission, then worldwide revival will come.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does it mean to you to know that you are adopted back into the family of God?
2. How does the Holy Spirit show Himself to be present in your life; how do you know that He is at work?
3. What religious practices have we taken on in our churches which have more to do with social tradition than the mission of Christ? What value do they have?

### Discipleship

When reading and studying a passage of Scripture such as this, each of us will feel that there is something about the passage which remains a mystery to us; something unexplained. Indeed, if we think that we understand it totally, then we may be fairly sure that we have not yet begun to understand it in any depth. Read through this passage, and dwell on any part of it which seems to be a mystery to you. Try researching the text, on the internet or in any books you have. Try to develop your own skills in doing Bible study!

### Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, the glory of Your redemption dawns on us ever more brightly, day by day. We praise You for the amazing generosity which You have displayed and which makes all who turn to You acceptable for a share of Your glory! Save us from being small minded, Lord Jesus: AMEN

### Prayer

Guard me, Lord Jesus, please guard me. Silence my mouth when I would say what is wrong, stay my hand when I try to do what is evil, and avert my eyes from dwelling on that which is unwholesome. Fill my life, O Lord, with the things of God; words of wisdom and encouragement, deeds of kindness and generosity, and the sight of Your beauty in Creation ever before my eyes. Guard me, O Lord, and save me: AMEN.

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Local Shops

Pray today about items which are sold in local shops about which you may feel concerned; for example, cigarettes, pornography and sexually laden magazines for youngsters, foods which contain unhealthy ingredients, or medical products with dubious claims. See if you can find ways of challenging the selling of such things, without alienating shopkeepers unnecessarily.

### Meditation

I heard the phone ring;  
Someone wanted to talk to me immediately, and I responded.  
May I be quick to respond to You, O Lord.

I smelt a fragrant perfume;  
Someone I loved was close to me, so I gave my full attention.  
May I be receptive to Your love, Jesus Christ.

I heard the door bell chime;  
Someone had come to visit me, and I entertained them very well.  
May I be eager to entertain You, Holy Spirit.

I saw a colleague approaching;  
Someone with whom I needed to work, so did, and gave my best.  
May I give my finest work to You, God of Creation.

I heard my name being called;  
Someone was speaking my name; calling me, calling me, calling me.  
May I not fail to hear your voice, Almighty God and Father.

### Bible Study - Galatians 4:1-11

<sup>1</sup> What I mean is this; as long as the heir is under age, he is no different from a slave, although he is the owner of everything. <sup>2</sup> He comes under the supervision of guardians and stewards until the date set by the father. <sup>3</sup> In the same way, when we were under age, we were enslaved to the basic spirits of the universe. <sup>4</sup> But when fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under law, so that we might receive back again our adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup> Because you are indeed sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' <sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir, because of God.

<sup>8</sup> Previously, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to natural things which are not gods. <sup>9</sup> But now you have come to know God, or more than that, to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless basic spirits, and seek, moreover, to be their slaves once again? <sup>10</sup> You observe the days and months and seasons and years. <sup>11</sup> I am fearful that my work for you has in some ways been wasted.

### Review

We all repeat ourselves, and sometimes make what we say sound boring. But we can say something again and then change what we are saying just a little as we go along; this helps both us and those who listen gain a better idea of what is on our hearts. Paul does this quite

often in his letters, and our passage today is a clear example of it. Yesterdays' passage was a lengthy and impassioned plea to the people of the Galatian churches to accept that before Christ came, the people of God lived under the laws of Moses like a child lived under the direction of a guardian or mentor (3:23,24), but with the coming of Christ, they had come into an adult relationship with the Father characterised by faith (3:25,26). Now, in chapter 4, Paul repeats himself by stating the same basic understanding of the new life and inheritance of a Christian, but goes on to say so much more about what it means (4:4f.). Repeating himself is Paul's method of carrying us along to hear more and more about what it means to receive the full benefits of being a 'son of God'.

The first interesting thing is Paul's description of the state of people before the coming of Christ; as 'enslaved to the basic spirits of the universe' (4:3). The phrase itself most naturally means the evil spiritual forces of the universe which in Paul's day were thought to govern the state of the world and the lives of people generally. However, here in Galatians, Paul's arguments are basically about the Law, which is contrasted with freedom in Christ, and it seems as if the 'basic spirits' includes the Law! This was a very derogatory way of speaking about the revelation of God through Moses! This terminology appears again in verse 9, where Paul appeals to God's people not to turn back to 'weak and worthless basic spirits' and so become their slaves 'once again!' Paul was certainly not shy in speaking so boldly against something God had given which had become a form of bondage to people who had not accepted their full freedom in Christ. He was horrified at the thought of anyone accepting the glorious liberty of a son of God and then turning back to the religious system of the Law, with all its worldly crudity; it was too awful for him to contemplate.

However just as we found yesterday, the angst and passion with which Paul wrote led to him say a number of quite outstanding and beautiful things which describe the relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ. He wrote about receiving an inheritance from God which the Father had planned to make available at a specific time in the life of the world (4:4). He described the principle of adoption by which Gentiles could become part of God's people (4:5). Paul's opponents said that people could only take part in God's inheritance through being circumcised; Paul refused to accept this and instead wrote confidently about the principle of adoption by which children outside a family could be added by the will of the Father.

Paul wrote next about the presence of the Spirit in the life of the believer (4:6) which changes the heart and leads it to cry out, naturally, to the Father using a term of family endearment 'Abba'. What Paul said is a little difficult to unpick, but the basis of it is this; no-one can deny the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Gentile believer who calls out 'Abba' to God the Father. Now if the Holy Spirit has so moved in the heart of a Gentile believer, then he (or she) must surely be a full heir of the Father. What higher gift does the Father give in this world than the gift of His own Spirit?

What possible reason could anyone have for wishing to take on board the things of the past from before the full revelation of God through Jesus Christ (4:8-11)? Paul was concerned that if people (the Judaisers) really thought this was right, then he was wasting his time!

### **Going Deeper**

As we go deeper into the text, we will study the themes which come freshly from this passage; the important subject of adoption and redemption, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer and the shattering consequences of falling back into the ways of the Law after receiving the true heritage of Christ. Paul regarded it as crucial that not only did people understand the decisions they took to become followers of Christ Jesus, but the full consequences of that decision, and why they could not go back.

#### **Adoption and redemption**

The Judaisers in the churches of Galatia had a neat way of explaining to new Gentile Christians that although they had received a wondrous gift through baptism in Jesus Christ, they needed to take part fully in the experience of their spiritual ancestors, those whom God had chosen, the Jews. Paul's response to this argument was to talk firstly about the way in which the history of God's people was not all that it was supposed to be. Indeed, it was a relationship of immaturity rather than maturity (4:1,2). However, the significant part of what Paul said after this is found in verse 5, which in most translations appears like this; '... so that we might receive adoption as sons'. However, you will notice that I have translated the passage '... so that we might receive back again our adoption as sons.' What is the difference? The Greek word used for 'receive'

has a distinct sense of receiving 'again' which I have included, but other translators have left out as insignificant. Why do I think this is significant?

Paul was talking in sweeping terms about the human state, and as such, he was capable of going back before the time of Abraham to the original state of humanity as described by Adam and Eve. It was part of his general belief as a Jew that 'in Adam' all humanity had sinned; in another of his letters he wrote 'as in Adam all die ...' (1 Cor 15:22f.). Paul regarded Adam as both the literal ancestor of all people and an example of the degenerate state of all people (see also Romans 5:14f.), and as such, Adam represented everyone. Now when Adam was first created, he had a perfect relationship with God which was lost at the 'Fall' when he and his wife sinned. Given this background, it is clear that Paul intended his readers to see that the non-Jewish person who received Christ by faith was adopted directly back into God's family, restoring the relationship that was broken at the Fall. In Adam, all of us were once 'sons of God', but we receive this privilege back through faith in Christ!

Now this is all straightforward for us today, but someone had to point this out and make it clear. That person was Paul, and this is where he explained it, and it is the glorious truth for all Christians today who have no direct connection with the Jewish people.

#### ***The presence of the Holy Spirit – a guarantee of inheritance***

One of the irrefutable signs of the presence of the work of God in the believer was the presence of the Holy Spirit. It was the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit which led Peter to accept that God was indeed working to open the doors of the church to the Gentiles through his strange visionary experience with Cornelius (Acts 10 & 11, and 10:44f. and 11:15f.). It was the Holy Spirit who had set aside Paul and Barnabas for the first missionary journey which ended in the conversion of people in Galatia and the formation of the Galatian churches (Acts 13:1-3), and it was the argument that the Holy Spirit had been given to Gentiles which carried the day in the Council of Jerusalem, when it was declared by the Apostles that circumcision was not required of Gentile believers (Acts 15:8f., 15:28).

It comes as no surprise then that Paul should cite the presence of the Holy Spirit as sufficient evidence that someone was a 'son of God' (4:6). It seems that in the days of the early church, it may have been regarded as miraculous that a Gentile who previously knew nothing of the background of the faith, should, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, cry out 'Abba, Father' to God. These were words which Jesus Himself used to address the Father, the night before He died in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36)! How else could they be known and used except by the work of the Holy Spirit? Of course, there was a limited time during which this could happen genuinely and without people having prior knowledge of these words, but there were other 'gifts' of the Holy Spirit which were regarded as clear evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:4f.), especially 'speaking in tongues' (1 Cor 12:10, 1 Cor 14:2f.). Also, it appears that in some parts of the Early Church, people held certain expressions as clear evidence of the Spirit at work; for example; 'no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 12:3 – see also Romans 10:9).

All this reflects a growing body of evidence that Paul could use to tell the Judaisers that there was no evidence that the law helped Christians in any way to achieve salvation and sonship of God, even by adoption. If the Holy Spirit testified in God's people that they were saved and were living the new life of the Spirit, what more could possibly be required!

#### ***How can you turn back again (again)?***

In the light of all this, Paul appealed to his readers to consider where they had come from. Speaking now to the Gentile Christians rather than to the Judaisers, he spoke of the general world view of the time rather than the Jewish history of Abraham and Moses from which the Judaisers had come. People who lived in the Roman towns and cities of what was called Asia (today, Turkey) had inherited general Greek myths and legends and more local ancient myths which spoke of primeval forces responsible for the beginnings of the world, and of the activities of the gods which people believed affected the world in which they lived. Paul appealed to them, saying that they knew where they had come from; 'you were enslaved to natural things which are not gods.' (4:8). By this he meant all the groundless mythology and superstition of the Roman world. They also, he said, knew full well that they had received a complete spiritual transformation which had lifted them out of this superstitious past. What therefore was the point in picking up the past believe systems of the Jews?