

Nothing but the Blood (Part 15)

Galatians 4:21-31

Pastor Edward Cheng

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This past week I had the opportunity to visit a newly renovated Mormon temple. Normally a Mormon temple is off limits to non-Mormons and even many Mormons once it is consecrated, but newly built or renovated temples allow visitors before consecration. After the building's dedication, Mormons need to earn a special card called a "Temple Recommend" in order to visit the Temple. It is only obtained by passing an interview with church leadership to ensure that this individual is qualified to visit. They make sure the person attends church regularly, spreads Mormonism to others, submits to church leadership, avoids associations with non-Mormons, and pays the mandatory tithe, among other requirements. In order to go to their Temple, where they believe God resides, Mormons must earn the privilege through their works. This, in my opinion, is the epitome of religious slavery. Why would people choose a system like this?

In Galatians 4, Paul exhorts the Galatians not to turn back to such a works based system. Paul previously taught them about the spiritual freedom they had in Christ, and that their place as children of God and heirs to the kingdom of heaven was secured for free. Yet the Galatians still wanted to turn back to the works-based system of the past. Why would anyone want to choose such slavery over freedom? Like the Mormons, perhaps they were attracted to such a system because they thought (wrongly) that they could actually achieve God's standard of righteousness, thinking themselves more righteous than they were.

In this chapter, Paul contrasts the righteousness achieved by man with the promised righteousness freely given by God through Jesus. He does so by using the story of Hagar and Sarah as an allegory. Recall from Genesis that God promised Abraham a son. However by the time Sarah was 90 years old (which is still considered old even at that time), Abraham and Sarah began to doubt. So they took things into their own hands and had Abraham conceive a child with Sarah's servant, Hagar. This son, Ishmael, was the son born by man's devices. But later Sarah gave birth to Isaac in her old age. This was the son of promise.

Verses 23 and 29 state that Ishmael was the son born according to the flesh, which is an analogy to the man-made system of righteousness by works. Verses 22-25 and 30 describe this system as slavery, just as Hagar was a slave. Yet people still find this slavery attractive if they

think that righteousness can actually be achieved through works. We naturally have that longing to achieve and feel accomplished. We admire those who have worked hard to achieve wealth and success over those who were just lucky and won the lottery. We admire those who worked hard to get into college over those whose parents bribed their way to elite schools. We like to feel good about our hard work and pat ourselves on the back for our accomplishments. Yet this is not the mindset we should have, because it is thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought. Romans 12:1-3 tells us that we should not think too highly of ourselves. We are not that righteous and could never earn our way to God.

Even though we today do not seek out a system of works-based righteousness, we have the same mindset as the Galatians. We often think of ourselves too highly and judge others as being less righteous as ourselves. Yet compared against God's standard of righteousness as described in the Sermon on the Mount, all of us fall short. Stop judging others and examine yourself, and you will see how lacking you are. Don't think for a second that your good works earn God's favor because you don't even come close to His standard. Instead be joyful that His favor was freely given, and that your place as His children is secured by Jesus.

In contrast to the slavery of Hagar, Paul describes Sarah as being free in vv. 22-23, and 26. The old system is represented by Sinai, but the new is represented by the New Jerusalem (see Revelation 21:1-8). This is a place where all may drink the water of life *without cost*. Let us not turn back to slavery when we are free. Granted, God is pleased when we obey Him, but His favor and our position as His children can never be lost. Once adopted we cannot be disowned. Just as no amount of disobedience would affect the fact that my sons are my children, our place in God's family is secured by Jesus Christ. Finally in v. 30, we are reminded once again that we, having received this secured inheritance, are now free. We are no longer slaves, so let us not turn from the freedom that God has given us through Jesus.