

CHILDREN OF GOD

SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS

By Steve Zeisler

Since the summer political conventions, commentators and other leaders of thought have been trying to make sense of religion as it's played out in public life. Even *Doonesbury* this week has resurrected Reverend Scott, who's excited about the fact that God has made a comeback! I'm fascinated by the perspective of secular observers. They express curiosity about religious conviction as if it were a specimen to be examined, a peculiar relic of the past.

In reality, the situation is the reverse: The odd thing is when anyone tries to make sense of life without a primary relationship with God forming their thinking. And historically, in every generation, secular authorities--the government, the elite, the intellectual leaders of thought--pass away, and with them their ideas. The word of God is what remains.

Let me give you an example. In Acts 18, the apostle Paul and others had gone to Corinth, founded a church there, and come under attack, as they always did. This particular attack was led by Jews in the city who were angry at their interpretation of Scripture, that is, the gospel. Eventually the Jews took it to court, where a Roman governor named Gallio was sitting as judge. He listened to the arguments for a while, and then he said, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law--settle the matter yourselves. I will not be judge of such things." He had them ejected from the court. He was saying, "The arcane details of your religion are completely uninteresting to me. I'm a Roman judge! It's beneath me to be concerned about such silly things as that dusty old book you read, the parsing of religious ideas, and references to long-gone prophets."

Now, as we study Galatians we're going to go back to words and names and the ancient scrolls of prophets who are long since gone. We are still reading the words of God. We are still trying to understand details that are sometimes difficult to be sure of. We are going to go back and wrestle with the very same ideas they were wrestling with in Corinth. And do you know whose voice is *not* going to be heard this morning? Gallio's. The secular elite of that day have passed away. The Roman Empire itself has faded into memory.

Those who are saying that religious conviction is an anachronism today will someday be gone as well, and people will still be studying the words of God according to the Scriptures. People will still be asking, "How can I find the life that comes from God? How can I understand his word?"

The important tension that we are focusing on in the book of Galatians, however, is not between secular thinking and the gospel. The danger is not that somehow the forces that care nothing for God will win. The important tension in Galatians is between a false gospel and the true gospel. The danger is that we will misrepresent God.

Remember, in Paul's opening "salvo" in the book of Galatians, he says there is an apostolic gospel that comes from heaven and a distorted gospel that comes from human beings. He is upset about it! And throughout the book we see this distinction. You can live for either the approval of human beings or the approval of God. You can live in either bondage or liberty.

Chapter 3 began with a series of questions. The apostle says, "You have become the home of the Holy Spirit. You now find yourself made hopeful and vital and free. Miraculous interventions happen. Relationships are restored. What was dead is made alive. This is the reality of the presence of the living God in your life. So how did it happen? Was it because you listened to a divine word from heaven and believed what you heard? Or did the presence of God come because you accomplished the works of the law and made yourself a better person?" The

obvious answer to the question is that it's hearing and believing that draws us into the presence of God. It's not making ourselves worthy. So don't let anyone take from you that genuine experience you've had of the presence of God! Claim the standing that comes with it.

What follows, starting in 3:6, is a long argument from Old-Testament Scripture, which we'll be considering for a few messages. So we have on the one hand an argument from experience (Galatians 3:1-5), and now on the other hand we have an argument from what the Bible teaches (beginning with 3:6).

Abraham believed God

To review, "Even so, Abraham..." Now, the NIV translates it "Consider Abraham..." but that's not a very good translation. The leading word in the Greek is *kathos*, which means "even so" or "just as." Paul was saying, "Your experience of the Holy Spirit has been such-and-such; even so Abraham..." Abraham is arguably, apart from Christ, the greatest human figure in recorded history. He is the one who began the salvation story. In Adam's sin were lost God's intimate presence in the garden and humanity's purpose for living. When God came to Abraham, he said, "I will bless you. I will give you myself and I will make you a blessing to the world. I'm going to give your life meaning again." Abraham is the fountainhead from which salvation has flowed to every generation since. Now, Paul was saying, you heard the word of God and believed it, and the Spirit entered your experience, *just as Abraham experienced*. That's a great compliment--you and Abraham are equivalent!

Paul went on to argue in verse 7, "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham." It is those who have the faith of Abraham who are his children, not those who can claim some physical lineage to him. Verse 9: "So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

Verses 10 and following again took us back to the Old Testament. Paul argued here that the law was insufficient to give life. "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'" The law is different from the promise given to Abraham by faith.

This is exactly what Gallio hated: it's about words. In fact a whole argument in the next paragraph is going to turn on whether a word is plural or singular. Paul focuses attention on specifics as we try to understand who these people were, in what order things happened, and what it means. Paul is unpacking all of this insight into the glories of the old pages of Scripture...and our initial response might be like Gallio's: "So what? These old details don't seem to relate to me." But they do. Underneath we are finding out who our father is. We are finding out who we are and what life really consists of. We are finding a way to get help when we struggle. We are being given answers to the deepest questions. So rather than dismiss the theology of this, let's do our best to wrestle with it, to hear it and believe it, to love it.

We'll pick up the argument in Galatians 3:15-18:

Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

Abraham's seed

There are a couple of important declarations here. First, the offspring of Abraham are collected into one person, who is the “seed” of Abraham. Abraham had only one child of promise, in the final analysis. But that child, our Lord Jesus Christ, embraces us all. We are in Him, and thus we are children of Abraham.

The other thing he says is that a promise was made, a covenant declared, before the law was given. The timing is important. If someone makes a determination and sets it in the form of a covenant that is duly ratified, the wheels have been set in motion, and the actions specified in the covenant will happen. The one who makes the covenant commits himself or herself to these things in a way that can't be changed. It doesn't matter if sometime later--430 years later in this case--that same person makes a different sort of agreement about other matters. The original covenant, or promise, is not changed. Paul's argument is that the promise is older, deeper, wiser, and truer than the laws of God that were given to Moses.

A legitimate question then, in verse 19 is, “What was the purpose of the law?” This promise to Abraham that makes us heirs, this word of God's love that we believe--if it was all true from the very beginning, then why was there a subsequent arrangement made by which God gave a set of rules for one particular nation to follow? Verses 19-25:

What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one.

Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

A promise vs. a deal

A promise and a deal are not the same thing. They both have usefulness, but they apply to different issues. The best example of this that I can think of occurs in parenting. Parents make promises to their children from the beginning without even thinking about it. You hold a child in your arms for the first time, and you start telling her how much you love her. You speak of all your hopes and dreams, the wonderful possibilities and the future you want to provide (if God gives you the grace to do so). You don't expect a response yet. You're not making a deal. You're not saying, “If you do certain things, then I'll do this for you.”

When our firstborn child Sarah, who is now grown, was an infant, she had colic. After some experimenting, the only way I found to help her get to sleep at night was to hold her stomach-down with her head resting on my palm and her feet hanging down over my arm. Many nights I'd walk around holding Sarah like this, and as I walked I talked to her, thanking God for her, dreaming dreams for her, making promises to her, telling her how much I loved her. She didn't know what I was saying. But as a father you can't help but start with love, promising all that you want to give.

That's exactly what our heavenly Father did for us. He made a promise to Abraham before he ever asked for anything from anyone. “Abraham, I will bless you. You will be a blessing to the world. Your children will be as

the stars in the heavens. Your life will be worth more than you can imagine.” All Abraham had to do was say thank you and believe it. God never said, “Abraham, I’ll do this if you do that.” It was a promise, not a deal.

Then, 430 years later, God also made a deal with one nation among the peoples of the earth. Making a deal is also something you find yourself doing in parenting. In a deal you’ve got your part to play and the children have their part.

We made a deal with our children that they had to eat their peas before they could have ice cream. Now, we had a patio door behind the table where we ate. I didn’t find this out until much later, but one of our children who hated peas used to flick them out the door when I wasn’t looking.

In any case, a deal has usefulness. There are important things that need to be arranged, especially for little ones. Before they grow up and are old enough to handle everything themselves, they need restrictions. They need discipline, consequences, hard lines drawn. We don’t start out wise or good or true. We start out arrogant and self-centered and silly. In the same way, the law comes in as an instructor, “because of transgressions.” We are “locked up” under the law. We are told “no.” The law awakens in us awareness of realities that we had no notion of before. We make discoveries about our own failure. When we tell ourselves lies, the law insists that A is A and B is B and they are not the same thing, and if we say they are then we’ve got a problem.

So the law is a very good thing—but it never gives life! It never makes you well. It doesn’t establish a relationship with God. It doesn’t justify you. It doesn’t forgive you. The Spirit of God doesn’t come into anyone’s life because they did a better job of succeeding in the deal. The promise is the only way we get life.

Now, children can always tell if you change a promise into a deal. They are on to it in a second! They are legal scholars with fine points at the ready. I remember telling our children when they were young, “I love Disneyland! And when you’re old enough, I’m going to take you there.” I kept that promise. Let me add this on the side: if you are a parent and you make promises to your children, then keep your promises. But suppose I had subsequently tried to change the promise into a deal: “I’ll take you to Disneyland if you get an A on your report card.” It would have been met with outrage! “That’s not fair! How can you withhold something from us that you promised without condition?”

That’s the logic Paul is applying here. God has given something away already. He is not going to attach conditions to it. It is hearing and believing him, acknowledging him, glorying in his love that leads to life. The deal, or the law, has another purpose. We need the law mostly because of our immaturity. We need restrictions, negatives, buffeting, and hurt until we’re old enough to trust God, until our faith has grown to a place where it’s a real and living thing to us. But when we are old enough to be mature children of God, then the law’s usefulness is over.

Verses 26-29:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

God’s unconditional love

We are the offspring, the seed of Abraham. As I said earlier, Christ is his one offspring, and we are placed in Christ; therefore we are Abraham’s offspring collectively in Christ. And therefore we are the ones who inherit the promises made to Abraham. “I will pour out blessings on you,” God said to Abraham, “and I will make you a

blessing. I will give you a useful, purposeful, good, and worthy life. You get to be good for the sake of the world you live in. You get to receive good from God.”

The term “sons of God” has nothing to do with maleness, but rather with maturity. It means being full-fledged, grown children, not little ones anymore. It is as grown sons of God that we inherit the promises. And look what happens in the family: we’re related to everybody else who inherits the same promises. There is no longer any important distinction between slave and free. Who cares what accent you speak with, what education you have, what riches are yours, or whether you are a woman or a man? We are all one in Christ. We are all the objects of his love. We all enjoy his favor. We have grown up. The distinctions, if they were ever useful, no longer apply.

The greatest story ever told of a father and his children is in Luke 15. This remarkable father had two sons. The younger son took his inheritance, humiliated his father in so doing, and left for the far country. He broke every one of the rules the father had made for righteousness and appropriateness for sons. The older son did everything he was told. He was responsible, hardworking, and dedicated. But neither one of them gained or lost his father’s love by the way he lived. The son who went to the far country came back to see a father gazing down the road, hoping for his return. When he came home, his father loved him. And the older son, who succeeded every day of his life, heard his father remind him, “We have always been together, and all that I have is yours.”

The greatest story ever told about a father and his sons is about something much deeper, truer and more beautiful than performance: unconditional love. All who believe are children of God. What we are called on to do is just be grateful, believe it, enjoy it, embrace it, and reject the lie that God cares more about how we look than who we are.

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Steve Zeisler
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