

Galatians 3 'Freedom !!'

If you were here last week you'll know that Ian and I got our wires , or computers, or something crossed and the result is that we looked at chapter 4 last week, and our focus is chapter 3 today.

There is just too much in Galatians chapter 3 to tackle in one morning, so I'm going to give a very quick overview of the chapter, and then look at a few verses, at the end of the chapter in some detail. Perhaps if you're interested you could read through the whole chapter later.

Anyway, Paul starts the chapter in his usual tactful way – you foolish Galatians !! Not really one for beating about the bush or pulling punches is Paul.

And why does he call them foolish ? Because they've been listening to false teaching, and not just listening to it, but really taking notice of it too.

These false teachers have been insisting that circumcision and adhering to the letter of the law is necessary for salvation. Paul knows otherwise, and what really gets his goat is the fact that the Christians in Galatia knew that as well, but have let themselves be led astray.

Then, moving on through the chapter we get into a discussion of whether we are saved by faith or by works. There is no doubt in Paul's mind that this is a contrast between a blessing and a curse.

And then we get a demonstration of Paul's amazing gift for writing and drawing ideas together cohesively. In verses 15 to 22 he brings together Moses, Abraham and Jesus Christ, he spans 2000 years, he teaches a unity between the old and new testaments, putting the law into much needed perspective.

And then we reach verse 23, where our reading began a few minutes ago.

Read v23-26

Paul tells the Galatians that they have a choice. They can either live 'under the law' or live 'in Christ' Either they live according to the teaching of Moses, or the teaching of Jesus. Either they are still waiting for the fulfilment of the promise, or they've already inherited the promise.

That was a choice facing each Christian in Galatia, and it's a choice that continues to be relevant for us today. Put simply, are we living a faith that exists in the Old Testament, or one that exists in the New Testament ?

Are we bound by religiosity, lots of rules that we must keep, or have we moved on to experience freedom in Christ ?

Perhaps sometimes we're not one hundred percent sure which we're living by. It's not always obvious to us, as it wasn't for the believers in the churches of Galatia. Paul gives us two examples of what being 'under law' means, and these might help us to decide where we stand.

The prison and the custodian.

The first is about being prisoners –

Before faith came we were confined under the law, kept under restraint.

These words 'confined' and 'restraint' make me think of placing physical restrictions on someone. I remember as a teenager hearing that my friends had been grounded for coming home late. Their movements were going to be restricted so that they could go to school, but then they couldn't come out at night. And it makes me think about someone with an ASBO, anti social behaviour order, who can't be walking round town after seven o'clock at night.

Is that how Christian living makes you feel? Is it all about restricting your life, stopping you doing what you want, holding you back, taking away your choices and freedom?

The second example Paul gives is of the 'custodian'. The 'tutor' the guide and guardian of boys.-

In Paul's day the 'tutor' wasn't a teacher, but was responsible for supervising boys and youths movements, making sure they were escorted to and from school, etc. They were usually a slave, and often harsh in the treatment of their charges.

So the law is likened to somebody telling us how we can and can't behave, and warns us about the penalties for bad behaviour. Like a bad tempered minder shooing us into line and threatening us when we dare to overstep the mark.

Do you find that Christian living is all about making sure you don't break the rules. Doing exactly what you're told and when, or else?

If that's our only experience of Christian living then it's no wonder that Christians are sometimes accused of being boring, or miserable or unsmiling, or no fun, or whatever it is people want to say about us. No wonder all our joy has gone, as Ian talked about last week. There's no joy in feeling restricted and rule bound in our faith.

There is a much more attractive alternative available to us, and that is to live not 'under the law' but instead as Paul says, to live 'in Christ'.

But what does living 'in Christ' mean?

To answer in one word, freedom!

Perhaps you've watched the TV programme about Longleat that features the work of the house and wildlife park. I'm always fascinated by how they move the animals round and control them, especially the more dangerous ones. I remember watching one episode where a new lion was being introduced into the enclosure. It was kept initially in a set of clever cages that could be sectioned off or linked up to move the lion safely. As it was filmed it was pacing round, and going up and down its small run looking really agitated. But then at the right time with a careful release of one door, it was out into a massive open area, so big that it wouldn't feel like it was an enclosure. And its mood changed instantly. It was off running and exploring. The lion had a sense of freedom.

Paul writes to the churches of Galatia about a freedom that comes from Christ, that releases them from things that may well restrain them, keep them feeling restricted.

He says, 'you are all one in Christ Jesus'. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. What a claim that is! What a bold statement that was to make in a culture where being Jewish (or not) defined everything, and where these Galatian Christians were being expected to take on the trappings of Judaism.

Living in Christ means accepting that he came to die for all people, regardless of their religion or culture or belief that they might be in some way superior. When the chips are down none of that really matters. Jesus came to give life in all its fullness. None of us has life in all its fullness until we have accepted Jesus, regardless of our religious or cultural heritage.

Living in Christ means knowing that social distinctions have been blown apart. We may not live in a society where slavery is acceptable, as it was for the churches in Galatia, but we still have a class system (despite what Margaret Thatcher tried to claim !) There are still differences of wealth and poverty, and attitudes of snobbery. But in Jesus all that can disappear, I can cease to matter.

Living in Christ means that there is no distinction made on the basis of sex. What a very radical thing for Paul to say in a culture where women were despised and often exploited and ill-treated– sex equality two thousand years ahead of its time- and coming from someone who is supposed by many to have been very anti feminist. Jesus died for each one of us, male and female alike.

So Freedom! From the things that bind us and hold us and imprison us. Freedom from our religious and cultural and social and sexual expectations. A life lived with Jesus sets us free..No longer do we need to be pacing like caged animals, but instead Jesus allows us to run feeling free and unrestricted.

That's why Paul was getting so exasperated with the Galatians, why he called them 'foolish' – they had had this freedom, known a new life in Christ, and now they were choosing to get back inside this metaphorical cage.

Before I finish I would like to add two notes of caution.

Firstly being 'all one in Christ Jesus' does not mean that actually our culture or social standing or sex disappears. Whether we are male or female is important because God has made us to be different. Nor are we trying to deny that differences of race or culture exist. We do not become colour blind asexual beings with no consideration of our backgrounds. But what it does mean is that Christ sets us free from the barriers that separate us. We recognise each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second note of caution is regarding running free without constraint from the law. I think it's good to distinguish running free from running wild ! Although we are not caged by the law and we do not have an endless list of dos and don'ts, that is not an excuse to do whatever we like when we like without consideration. God has high expectations of those who claim to belong to him.

It may seem like ages ago, but actually its only a few weeks since we celebrated Easter. When we focus particularly on remembering that Jesus died a painful and degrading death so that we can enjoy a life of freedom in him.

If we live by religious rules alone, Jesus' death was for nothing. As John Stott says, It's so sad to be in prison and in the nursery when we could be grown up and free.

Wade Street 14.05.06 Housegroup notes.

Galatians 3: 23-29

The apostle Paul describes in these verses a vivid contrast between people who are 'under the law' and those who live 'in Christ'.

If we live under the law our faith is rule bound religion, restricting and restraining us. But if we live in Christ we are set free from rules.

We are 'all one in Christ Jesus' and that means that things that maybe bound us previously, such as race, culture, social standing and sex no longer do so. They cease to be important as we become brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Galatians were in danger of exchanging their freedom in Christ for a return to rules and restrictions. Paul warned them strongly against that; a warning that continues to be relevant for us today.

For discussion.

How do we know whether we are living 'under the law' or 'in Christ' ? Is it always possible to tell ?

Circumcision may not be an issue for us, but what religious rules might we find ourselves involved with ?

What can we do as church to help others find freedom in their faith rather than restrictions ? Do our church structures sometimes cause restrictions ? How ?

What would you particularly like to be 'set free' from ?