



09. Galatians 4:12 -5:6

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Galatians 4:12-15

¹²Friends, I beg you, become as I am for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. ¹³You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you. ¹⁴Though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as the Messiah Jesus. ¹⁵What has become of the good will you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

Did Paul fall ill and pick up an eye condition in the unhealthy coastal plain of Pamphylia (Acts 13:13) which caused him to stay longer than he intended?

Galatians 4:16-18

¹⁶Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?
¹⁷They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. ¹⁸It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you.

Paul cannot understand how these intruders who are working among them for their own purposes could persuade them to turn against him. It was ‘the truth of the gospel’ (2:5, 14) that he proclaimed to them.

Galatians 4:19-20

¹⁹My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until the Messiah is formed in you, ²⁰I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

With deep affection Paul admits how much their love means to him, even at a distance, and likens the pain they are causing him to the pains of labour (see Isaiah 45:9-11). Does he have to go through it all again to bring them back to the life they received from Christ?

Galatians 4:21-25

²¹Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. ²³One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise.

²⁴Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is **Hagar**, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. ²⁵Now **Hagar** [Genesis 16] is **Mount Sinai in Arabia** and corresponds to the present **Jerusalem**, for she is in slavery with her children.

Paul uses typology – seeing the present realities of Christianity and Judaism as reflected in the events of scripture. He also follows an allegorical method – aiming to give insight into the deeper truths hidden in the events to which he refers.

Galatians 4:25

²⁵Now Hagar [Genesis 16] is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

When Paul speaks of Jerusalem, he is speaking of the Jerusalem that crucified Jesus, the Jerusalem in whose name he himself persecuted Christians, and the Jerusalem represented by the Judaeans missionaries who have failed to grasp the freedom given them by Jesus, when he gave them the promised Spirit.

Galatians 4:26-27

²⁶The other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷For it is written, 'Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married' (Isaiah 54:1).

Jesus is the true representative of Jerusalem, and from 'above' it is he who has given them the life promised by God: the life of his Spirit. The Galatians have known this freedom. The Jews among them must not submit again to the yoke from which Jesus has liberated them. The Gentiles among them must resist those who are trying to convince them to take it up.

Galatians 4:28-31

²⁸Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac.
²⁹But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. ³⁰But what does the scripture say? ‘Drive out the slave and her son; for the son of the slave shall not share the inheritance with the son of the free woman’ (Genesis 21:10).
³¹So then, friends, we are children not of the slave but of the free woman.

The Genesis story of Sarah and Hagar (Isaac and Ishmael) is a beautifully constructed tale that expresses the sympathy of the author for Hagar and Ishmael. I have touched on it in my book *“The Christian New Testament and the Islamic Qur’an: a comparison”*, pages 11-12. (see the link on my homepage).

Galatians 5:1

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore,
and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:2-3

²Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, the Messiah will be of no benefit to you. ³Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law.

Paul's warning could not be more striking. If the Galatians continue to take notice of the Judaeans missionaries and seek their security in observance of the Jewish law, they are taking on themselves an intolerable yoke, for they would be undertaking to adopt the Jewish way of life through and through (see 3:10).

The origins of the practice of **circumcision** are obscure. It may have originally been a rite of passage to manhood. It may also have been a magic ritual to fend off evil spirits that threatened to make a man impotent. It was a widespread practice among Semitic peoples (and elsewhere), but was not practised either among the Philistines or among the Assyrians or Babylonians. It seems to have become important as an identifying sign only at the time of the exile, when the people of Judah were deprived of other identifying signs (king, temple, cult). It set them apart from the Babylonians in whose land they were exiled.

As a religious sign it is clearly related to the handing on of life, and so to the 'blessing'. It became a sign of the trust that God would, indeed, ensure a great offspring to Abraham (and so to Israel). In the very act of sexual intercourse, man and woman are reminded that the life offered and received is filled with promise.

With no public cult available, the persevering in faith of the family became crucial to maintaining their identity in a foreign land. Hence the importance of the whole family, including slaves, being obliged to comply with this law.

Galatians 5:4

⁴You who want to be justified within the law have cut yourselves off from the Messiah; you have fallen away from grace.

They are also cutting themselves off from Christ and falling away from grace. Paul has stated throughout this letter that salvation is a grace that comes to them from God's unconditional love. It does not depend on being circumcised or on not being circumcised. Through the love of his Son, God is offering to everyone communion in the life of intimate love that God and his Son enjoy in the Spirit.

This does have implications for their behaviour – Paul is about to speak about this. But the basis for their hope must not be their observance of a law; it can only be Jesus' love shown them in 'loving them and giving himself for them' (2:20). If they welcome this gift with faith, the Spirit of Jesus will cause the fruits of love to blossom in their lives.

Being in communion with God (being in a right relationship with God, translated here as 'righteousness') is something which we can lose by turning away from grace. If the Galatians are seduced by the Judaeian missionaries into attempting to secure 'righteousness' within (ἐν) the law, by committing themselves to observing it, they will lose it, for righteousness is something which they must receive, not something they can achieve. It is the gift and the fruit of Jesus' Spirit, and it is to be welcomed in faith.

Galatians 5:5-6

⁵For, through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in the Messiah Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Paul concludes by linking three central characteristics of the Christian life. He speaks of ‘hope’ and of ‘faith’ working through ‘love’.

We have already reflected on the meaning of ‘faith’ (πίστις, (see 2:15). Jesus shared in the faithfulness/fidelity of God, and offers to us a share in his faith

Let us look at the biblical meaning of ‘hope’ (ἐλπίς), and then ‘love’ (ἀγάπη).

Hope

In non-Biblical Greek ἐλπίς means ‘estimation’ or ‘expectation’. We should have a sound basis for our judgment of what the future might hold for us.

In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Psalms and prophetic writings ἐλπίς translates words expressing ‘trust’ and ‘taking refuge’. The focus is on God as the one in whom we place our trust.

A perfect expression of hope is found in Psalm 131:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great
and too marvellous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, **hope** in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

This sentiment continues in the Wisdom literature, but there the influence of non-Biblical Greek can also be seen with the focus shifting from present trust to future expectation.

In the New Testament ἐλπίς retains the idea of trust, but with the focus on the **future**. We could define it as a trusting confidence now in regard to the future – a trust based on one's faith in God. Trusting that God is faithful we are sure that what God has promised will happen and we can leave the future peacefully to God.

When Paul speaks of ‘eagerly waiting’, and when he speaks of ‘hope’, these are not the same. There is a place for eager longing. There is also, and more importantly, a place for hope, where the focus is not on longing for something for which one is expectantly waiting, but on present assurance because of the God in whom one now places one’s confidence, on whom one now relies, to whom one now looks.

This is not without importance in recognising the distinction between faith and hope.

Faith is concerned with objective reality: the fact that God is real, the fact that God's will has been revealed, and that our basic response (our 'faith') is to accept this truth revealed in our history, base our life upon it and act accordingly. In Paul, as we have seen, the objective reality in which we believe is what God has revealed in Jesus (1:12,16).

Hope speaks of an attitude of trust whereby, because we believe, we can leave the present and the future in God's hands.

The Galatians know their own frailty. They know how easily they fall back into sin. They know that the fullness of communion with God is something for the future. They are being frightened into thinking that the only way they can be assured of attaining to an eternal sharing with Christ is to be circumcised and obey the law. Paul, on the other hand, is encouraging them to eagerly await the promised communion, but to trust that God knows their longing. It is, after all, God's gift to them. God is faithful. Let them believe in Jesus and live accordingly: which means giving themselves to his Spirit.

Love

If they do this, they will find that the love which they see burning in Jesus' heart will set fire to their own, and this is all that matters: 'The only thing that counts is faith working through love' (5:6). Paul has spoken of 'love' only once to this point, where he used the verb ἀγαπάω in speaking of Jesus' love for him in giving himself for him (see 2:20). Now, for the first time, he uses the noun ἀγάπη. Let us pause to reflect on what he means by love, since it is at the very heart of Paul's gospel.

Though it is John and not Paul who uses the expression 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), from everything that Paul writes we can be confident that he could readily make this statement his own. Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God's self-giving, a 'word' of love.

When God revealed himself to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God's instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God's love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus' self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God's gift of self, to God's love.

The love of the heart of Jesus for Paul is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes elsewhere: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

One of the central texts of the Torah reads: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). Because the word ‘love’ is translated in the Greek version by ἀγαπάω, inevitably Paul uses this verb to speak of our basic relationship with God.

However, it may come as a surprise to discover how seldom he does so – in fact only three times:

1. In the following quotation: ‘As it is written: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who **love** him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).
2. ‘Anyone who **loves** God is known by him’ (1 Corinthians 8:3).
3. ‘We know that all things work together for good for those who **love** God’ (Romans 8:28).

Perhaps even more surprisingly, he speaks of our loving Christ only once, in the final sentence of his Letter to the Ephesians:

‘Grace be with all who have an undying **love** for our Lord Jesus the Messiah’ (Ephesians 6:24).

Furthermore, he never uses the noun ἀγάπη with either God or Jesus as its object. In the context of human behaviour, the noun always, and the verb on every occasion other than the four noted, refer to our relationship with other people. In speaking of our response to Jesus and to God Paul prefers to speak of 'faith'.

The love we are to have for one another is not any kind of love. It is God's love flowing through us to others. Paul sees love as divine. It flows from God to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and thanks to this gift from us to each other. Jesus' disciples are to have the same universal dimension to their love that Jesus had. This universal love is nurtured within the community of love where Jew and Gentile share in the same Spirit.

In this love is fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’ (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

In his love, Jesus is harnessing for his Father all the energies of love. It generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves; to love with his love. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus' own love to offer them.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in their mutual love. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship. It is not the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well. It is not a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals.

As Paul writes: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us: 'Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2).

When Paul says that ‘**the only thing that counts is faith working through love**’, he is quoting traditional Jewish wisdom. Judaism does not separate faith from obedience; it does not think of faith as an intellectual assent that leaves one’s behaviour untouched. To believe means to commit oneself to do God’s will ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Does not Jesus affirm the same truth: ‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 7:21).

James writes: 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves' (James 1:22).

'Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead' (James 2:17).

James is speaking about 'works of faith', not 'works of the law'. He is insisting, like Paul, that real faith bears fruit in love. Of course it matters what we do. Of course we must obey the will of God.

Paul's comments throughout this letter concerning the law do not claim that the law does not in any way express God's will. Nor is Paul suggesting that people should set out to disobey the law. He is not claiming that the law is totally irrelevant to the lives of Christians, or that circumcision is valueless for Jews.

In a letter composed later to the Romans Paul will ask: 'What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?. He will reply: 'Much in every way' (Romans 3:1-2).

In so far as obeying the law is an expression of faith and bears fruit in love, Paul thanks God for the law and rejoices in the gift he has as a Jew. But when observance of the law bypasses faith and is an obstacle to love, it cannot stand.

Furthermore, for Gentile converts to take on circumcision is to turn their back on the freedom offered them by Jesus. God has now revealed himself and his will in Christ. The law, or any other criterion of behaviour, must be checked against what God has revealed in Christ, not Christ reduced within the confines of the law. To abandon Christ for the law is to ‘**cut yourselves off from Christ**’. It is to ‘**fall away from grace**’ (Galatians 5:4).

Earlier in our present letter Paul spoke of Christ delivering us ‘**from the present evil age**’ (1:4), and redeeming us ‘**from the curse of the law**’ (3:13; see 4:5). In the present passage he pleads with the Galatians not to enslave themselves to anything or anyone other than Christ (see 1:10).

Note that the hope, the faith and the love to which Paul calls them are all experienced ‘**in the Messiah**’ (5:6).