

“Before Faith Came”  
 Sermon for 13 Nov. 2016  
 Texts: Galatians 3:21-26 & John 8:30-47

**Now before faith came, we were held captive by the law.** (v.23) Paul means here new covenant faith which is saving faith in Christ as distinguished from the faith of Abraham which was counted to him for righteousness. Both of those faiths were saving faiths, but the Paul’s primary reference is to **the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.** (v. 22) **So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.** (v.24) To be held captive is to be enslaved. It is intriguing that the tensions here between types of faiths directly relate to the passage in John 8. Verse 30: **As He was saying these things, many believed in Him.** That is they had faith in Him. Then in verse 31 a different construction is used for **So Jesus said to the Jews who believed him.** This difference even carries through in the English, to wit, **believed in Him** versus **believed Him**. The belief imputed to the Jews is inferior to the belief behind **believed in Him**. In the latter case, a measure of personal commitment is implied whereas in **believed Him** suggests a nominal belief. These folk were “in name only” disciples! They are not of the **abide in My word** variety! The same may be said of many Christians who are “nominal”; they claim to be Christian, but they sure don’t live like it!

What does it mean to **abide in My word**? It means a true Christian walks the walk and doesn’t just talk the talk. He knows the commandments of Christ and actually obeys them! He welcomes the word of Christ. He is at home with it, familiar with it, is immersed in it on a daily basis and that immersion is continuous throughout the day. The word is a fixture like we find on the sink in the kitchen, or our bathroom—it is something we visit often and use with regularity. It is familiar. So familiar you could even do it in the dark! The word is a permanent influence and stimulus in a life of advancing goodness, increasing holiness and observable Christlikeness. The personal presence and the word of Christ are unified in reality and influence in the life of the authentic Christian believer. A homey way to put this is: the genuine Christian lives within earshot of the Shepherd, the Master . . . just as sheep, or an apprentice would be. But even that is not actually close enough. To use a horticultural image, the word of Christ is the sap of the vine that invigorates the branches; that feeds, sustains and supplies the branch so that it can be fruitful . . . abundantly fruitful. It is not merely those who commit, but it is those who continue in commitment. They want for nothing.

The nominal Christian is not like this. And there are reasons for that! The nominal Christian has an exclusive and intense (as well as intensive) reliance on other things than God, or to be consistent, on the word of Christ. They are faithless, rather than faithful. They are obsessed with and blinded by the things of this world—those other things! (Although they would hardly welcome you pointing that out to them.) For instance, they may be reliant on ancestry, ethnic or national privilege, traditions, social status, wealth, status or power. Or, it may be blind trust in “religious” rites and ceremonies, external observances, a sacred calendar. They want for everything. Why? Because they are ignorant of their greatest need and they have no understanding of the pickle, or predicament, they are actually in! And it is imperative at this point to pause and ask, “Are you? Are we aware of our greatest need? Or are we alive to the seriousness of our situation apart from Christ?” *It is good to revisit these things often.*

Nominal Christians vainly imagine that they are “free” when in fact they are shackled. They are pathetically content with the low life they have settled for. They are physical, sensual and pleasure focused. The Jews who **believed him** apparently thought that the righteousness of Abraham was all they needed to be safe from spiritual perils. *But they are not measurably free from the evil impulses of their flesh, the world and the devil because of Abraham’s faith.* They were indignant with Jesus: we’re not half-breeds (as some suspect you might be—a sneering sentiment). We aren’t active idolaters, we are God’s servants (not that the service they rendered was very costly, or demanding!). We are keepers of the law. Yes, keepers as in holders, retainers, museum docents and archivists, but not as practitioners of the Law. Not as those who do the works of Abraham either.

Why even Christians can get edgy, be in denial and indignant, when the Spirit suggests that we are out of touch, blind to the truth about ourselves and have grown cold, strange or distant from God. What Jesus was communicating to these half-way converts was that only total surrender to God’s provision can save them. He was saying that unless my word finds its place in your heart, you are as lost as the Gentiles around you. You are in fetters, or chains that no nominal belief, or external religion can dent, let alone break. Listen as Jesus cites his evidence: **whoever commits sin is enslaved to to it** (v.34) and then demands in v.46 **which one of you convicts me of sin?** Jesus’ challenge goes unanswered because he is not inviting accusation, but convicting evidence. Here are some key indicators of a fettered nominal Christian:

1. whoever asserts his own will
2. whoever prides himself on independence
3. whoever floors his own inclinations
4. whoever lives to please primarily himself

Any nominal Christian considering that list should break out in a sweat! The person who is shackled to his self-interests is baggage, is a dumpster dweller. No better than a raccoon, or scavenging black bear at a north woods campsite!

The Jews stop their ears. They refuse to hear him and they want to kill him. Nice. They look alright on the outside, but inside they are not such good people. is the stuff they are made of, and lying is what they trade in. You see, the chief reason that they won’t hear Jesus is that they have bought the lies of the Enemy, the Evil One. As a sidebar we might observe that when Abraham had divine messengers, he welcomed them. (Gen. 18:2ff) He didn’t try to kill them. Anyway they refuse to come under the influence of the truth which is as much to say that they have aligned themselves with the devil. Remember, him? Lies are his native tongue . . . and when he lies he speaks from his nature, his character.

Well, is there any hope? Of course, But the first step is a difficult one: recognize your predicament and make an inventory of your bondage to sin, self or Satan. Then consider that self-salvation is not an option. Slaves have never been able to emancipate themselves—they can become runaway slaves, or rebels but neither of those avenues will result in adoption as son, or help to acquire a permanent place in the household. No one becomes an heir on his own, or an adopted son. Apart from that being done for you, the slave will remain expendable, temporary . . . without a place at the table. Indeed, no man can convert himself, **he must be born again . . . he must be born**

**from heaven, or from above** if it is going to happen. The slave may long to be free and he may strive to be free, but only Christ can truly set him free.

And Christ can only do that because he is truly innocent. He is the Savior and Redeemer. He alone can unfreeze those shackled in unbelief and confusion. Jesus died among criminals but he was not one. Similarly a man may look free from the outside and be a total slave on the inside. It took a New Man, the Second Adam to accomplish what Christ did on the cross for those who will **abide in his word, or have faith in Him**. Those are the ones who get into the kingdom—no one else does. Jesus can as one completely free from the chains that sin has forged that bind the human heart! Jesus, as the eternal Son, refuses to say that the who oppose him have the freedom of sons; they imagine that they do, but they are mistaken. Christians must not make the same mistake. The Jews call him a Samaritan, a madman, a deceiver, a false messiah and a blasphemer . . . they charge him with self-glorification, with making himself out to be greater than Abraham. Only in the last allegation are they correct. Yes, one greater than Abraham was in their midst. **He saw that day and was glad.**

**Amen**