
Freedom by the Gospel

Galatians 3:23-4:11

Russ Kennedy

Most moderns want their Bible teaching simple and theology plain. This is helpful when it is possible. Sometimes there are very simple ideas or concepts that help us understand complex Biblical ideas. One of these ideas runs all through the Apostle Paul's writings. This is the idea of the Old and the New, the old covenant and the new covenant. We need to have a basic understanding of the history of redemption so that we will be able to grasp some more difficult truths.

Paul is writing to deal with the issue of the Law and the gospel. What has he said that forms the context for the text we take up today?

²¹ Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. [ESV]

We are recipients of the promises of God by faith, by believing in Jesus Christ. This has been the burden of Paul's argument in Galatians 3. The promises to Abraham that were fulfilled in Christ were not countered nor nullified by the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law has its place in God's past economy. But now that Jesus has come, the whole Mosaic Law has been fulfilled, completed, and ended. The Jew could not be justified by keeping the Law. The Gentile cannot be justified by keeping the Law. Why? Because no one is justified by good works. No one is justified by law keeping *regardless of the kind of law it is*.

Why is this so? Because, from the beginning, God has saved people through faith. He has given them a right standing before Him (justified) through their believing His Word, His promises. Faith is not the grounds on which we are justified. We are justified because of Jesus' death and resurrection. Faith is the means by which God applied His righteousness to us. By grace, God grants us faith to believe and through that faith, imputes His own righteousness to us.

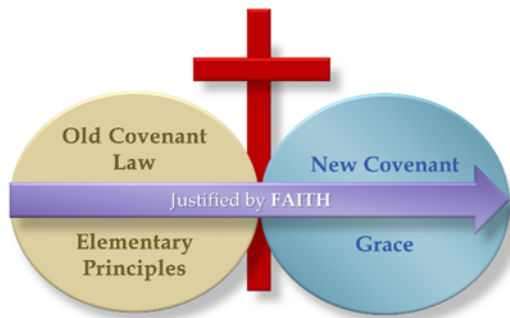
Once we put our faith in Christ and are united to Christ so that we are in Christ, we are no longer subject to the Law. We receive the promises in Christ. We receive the promises as heirs. The blessings promised are all that Christ has provided us including the promise of the Holy Spirit for every believer.

So, hear verse 21-23 as we move into our text this morning.

The Grand Change

(v.23-29)

Paul moves us into this paragraph with the surprising word, "imprisoned". He then enlarges on that word as he considers the great change that has taken place.



This illustration is the simple structure of Paul's thinking here and many other texts.

This great change has taken place in both redemptive history and in your personal history.

Under the Old

(v.23-24)

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

Under the old, the status and plight of all in the Old Covenant and all of us before conversion is given. We were all under sin. But, what is Paul saying when he says "we were held captive under the Law until Christ came?"

When we study the Bible, we must always recognize who the original audience was. Who was Paul writing to and what was he dealing with? He was writing to multiple churches scattered throughout Galatia. The church was made up of Jews and Gentiles. But Jews from the church at Jerusalem were trying to bring Gentiles under the Law. Paul is writing to the church, but he is primarily concerned with the Jews trying to bring the Gentiles under the Law. He was concerned that they were trading faith in Christ for the works of the Law. Now, we are primarily a Gentile congregation and we are listening in on a conversation what comes to us more indirectly. No one is telling us we have to be Jews to be good Christians. But a lot of people are trying to bring us back under the Law.

First, many say that we must preach the Law to the unbeliever before we preach the gospel. They say the unbeliever is under the Ten Commandments. Until a person understands that they have broken God's Law, they cannot believe. The problem with this is that neither Peter nor Paul do this. Gospel preaching in the book of Acts, to Jew and to Gentile, is not about law but about redemptive history. They tell the story of the Bible.

Second, many say that we must go back to the Mosaic Law to know how to live the Christian life. This is part of what Paul is directly dealing with. The Mosaic Law has come to an end. It is not how we live. We are not under it. We are not in the realm where it governs. There is no text that says that Gentiles were ever under the Mosaic Law. The ones who were exposed to the Mosaic Law will be judged by what they know. But that is only to increase their condemnation, according to Paul's writing in Romans 1-3.

Two ideas will help us:

To understand this text correctly, we need to understand the “we” and “us” here as the Jews to whom Paul is speaking, both in the churches of Galatia and those there from Jerusalem. The Gentiles are listening in to this conversation and rejoicing at their freedom from the Law. Therefore, it is really, for us, a “they” and “them”.

In Romans 2:12–16, Paul is clear that “we” Gentiles will be judged by God’s law in our hearts but we are not under the Mosaic Law.

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

We then are not under the Law because we never have been. Now we were still under law – under legislation. We were under the principle of law and works that rules over the flesh, the world, the realm of sin. Gentiles who are exposed to the Law as unbelievers will be accountable to it. So what Christ has done has not only made it so we must not put ourselves under the Mosaic Law, we must live in the freedom of grace faith has brought us into.

Paul employs two analogies to help believers think about the Mosaic Law correctly.

The first analogy is that of being imprisoned (v.23).

The Law functioned in the Old Covenant as a jailor. It kept people in custody. The “us” here refers historically to the Jews and personally to Paul. It was a jailor until the faith that was to come was revealed. The Mosaic Law was given to the Jews. The Jews were under it. The Law was added to show how sinful sin is and how sinful Israel had become.

This word “imprisoned” is helpful for it shows two important functions of the Law before Christ came in history.

It shows that people were guilty as charged. We were sinners. The Law was judge, jury and jailor. It passed a verdict and a sentence which it was unable by design to settle.

It is a grace in that it had a restraining affect. The Law was given because of the multiplying of transgression. So, it restrained Israel from sinking to horrific depths of the depraved practice of the pagans around them. It generally has the same effect on people generally. Growing up under law restrains sinners so that society can exist with relative justice and peace.

Peter tells us, using this same word, that we are guarded, warded, kept in protective custody by God’s power through faith (1 Peter 1:5) until the day when the new is complete.

Paul's second analogy is that of guardians over children (v.24).

Paul also illustrates from a common situation in their culture. While some of this is foreign to us, all of his original hearers and readers would know exactly what he was talking about. Young children were often placed in the care of wards and guardians. They were responsible to train the children for their place and station in life. They gave them their basic education as well as were instrumental in forming their way of thinking. They were responsible to be sure that they protected the child from moral evil. They were often strict, hard taskmasters. At a certain age, sometimes set by the culture, but more often chosen by the father, the heir would be given a party where he would be acknowledged formally and publicly as the heir. This public act of recognition and assignment was called by a Greek word usually translated, adoption in our English Bibles. After this point, the father usually took the son directly under his own care and tutelage.

So, while under the guardian, he was considered to be a child. Once he was placed into his position as an heir he was then called a son. Why this illustration? It vividly conveys the deep sense of the before and after, the old and new.

The Law functioned as a guardian, a schoolmaster, a ward over morals until Christ came. Here, he is referring primarily to the historical record. He is telling us a historical fact as well as a theological truth. The Law instructed Israel and people about sin until the sacrifice for sin came. Further, the Law did this so that, for this purpose, all, Jew and Gentile, might be justified by faith. In other words, the Law was limited in what it could do. But that limitation served well because God had designed that we be justified by faith, not by works.

In the New

(v.25-29)

²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Here is one of those great "now" in the Scripture. Because the faith that was to be revealed in this New Covenant age has now come, we are all, Jew and Gentile, sons of God through faith. I have come to see that the first "faith" is the truths revealed in the New Testament and the second "faith" is the act of believing what God has said. The key here is that we are all one in Christ. We are not "one" under the Mosaic Law. The Jews were under the guardian. We were not. The Mosaic Law was a wall between Jew and Gentile. But now that we are in Christ, we have a formal and functional corporate oneness.

We are no longer under the guardian because now we are in Christ. Just as the old covenant is gone and the new has come and all of us now live in the age of the new covenant, so we are now in Christ. We are now no longer in the realm where law rules; we are in Christ. And since we are in Christ Jesus, we are now fully acknowledged sons and heirs. Being united to and thus being placed into Christ moves us from the old into the new.

How does this take place? It takes place by the Spirit's act of immersing us in Christ at our conversion (v.27). For me, here is the one verse that is the strongest argument not to transliterate *batpizo* but to translate it. Our translations ought to convey the original meaning, not the current theological coin. So, verse 27 is saying that everyone who has been placed into, immersed into Christ has put on or has been totally submerged in Christ. The Biblical rite of water baptism is NOT in view here. Water baptism is the public, physical type of this inward, spiritual reality. But Paul is simply saying that if you have been placed into Christ, you are now immersed in a new realm. When you were saved, one of the things that happened is that a great spiritual cutting away from and a grand spiritual union into took place. You were "circumcised" from the realm of the old and you were "immersed" into the realm of the new, into Christ.

Not only are we no longer under the old teacher, we are no longer spiritually identified in the creation order. In Christ, there is none of the creation, old order distinctions. We are simply in union with Christ and with one another. This is important for something Paul will argue later. But it does raise a question? Should we continue to recognize these distinctions? Yes; while we are spiritually in Christ (and according to Ephesians, spiritually in the heavenlies) we are still physically here in the first creation. We live in the already and not yet. We live in this world while not being of it. While we live in this world in these physical bodies, these distinctions still hold true, just not ultimately. So, Paul will speak to men and women, to Jews and Gentiles, to slave and free. Until all things are made new, we are living spiritually in the new and physically in the old.

But here is the second great conclusion. If we are Christ's, then you are really Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. Here is the bookend to his argument. Christ is the offspring, the heir according to promise (v.1-14). You are in Christ by the act of God's Spirit. Therefore, by faith, you are the offspring, the heirs according to promise.

The Glorious Provision

(4:1-7)

So, why do we really care about this? We should pay attention to this because of the great privilege we have as sons and heirs, in Christ.

As Children under the Old

(v.1-3)

¹ I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, ² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. ³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

As we have mentioned, he refers here to the way children often were reared in his culture. Even through the child may be the future heir, until the appointed time comes, he is no better than a slave. He may be the owner of everything, but it does not matter yet. There are great privileges that he will one day enter and enjoy. But not yet. He is still the child of his father. But until the day set by the father comes, he does not enter the full ownership or enjoyment of his inheritance.

In the same way, we were like that child. Before Christ came, the Jews were imprisoned and enslaved to what he calls the "elementary principles of the world." Before faith comes, each of us individually are as well. These elementary principles are the guardians

and managers who guide and guard us until the time set by the heavenly Father. These elementary principles are the basic governing laws in the world, the flesh, the old. It included the Mosaic Law but also the laws of conscience and culture (Romans 1-2).

Just as a child who is an heir may live in his father's home and may even enjoy some of the good of that home, he is not the full heir until the proper time. So, the Jews before Christ and us before saving faith may enjoy some of the blessings and benefits reserved for later. The Law served to watch over Jews before Christ and before conversion so that we will be ready for the new.

As Sons in the New

(v.4-7)

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Here is the great moment. At the right time, the time set by the Father, He sends His Son into the world. He was born of a woman and is thus identified with our humanity. He is born under the Law and is thus under its demand and rule. This is described as "the fullness of time." When it was just the right time, Jesus comes as the fulfiller of the promises, as the One to whom it all pointed. It is the exact moment that God ordained. That coming and His cross split redemptive history to before and after. His coming inaugurates the new.

He is born of a woman and under the Law in order to redeem those who were under the Law. But there is more. We are not just bought out of the world; we are also adopted as sons. This act of adoption brings those who are regenerate into full standing as sons. God knows who His sons and daughters will be for He has chosen them from the foundation of the world. And, in the logic that Paul has been developing, since we are now in Christ and full sons, heirs of the promise, we receive the Spirit. From the beginning of chapter 3 till now, Paul has argued that the Spirit is one of the distinguishing marks of the New Covenant. The Spirit being sent into our lives in regeneration is an effect of God having chosen us to be adopted as sons.

Now, notice that Paul is giving a logical order, but not a chronological order in verse 6. We receive the Spirit because, grounded in, based on this truth, that we are sons. That is the logic. The chronological order here is not in view. From many texts including 1 John 5:1, we know that "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, has been born of God..." So what happens in time and space to us, regeneration by the Spirit and then the gift and exercise of faith, happens because we are chosen sons, living in the world under law.

Now, notice this text carefully. Unlike the one in Romans where we cry, "Abba, Father," here, it is the Spirit who comes crying, "Abba, Father." There is no contradiction here. The Holy Spirit coming into our lives crying "Abba, Father" is how we respond in our

souls to recognize and cry out to our heavenly Father, our Papa. Without the Spirit's inward work, our outward words would be presumption. But the Spirit's inward work, in the sons of God, authenticates that we are God's true sons.

So, here is the grand conclusion. You are no longer a slave. You are no longer imprisoned under the Law or a conscience bound to works. You are son. You are not just a child. Children are under the guardians and tutors. You are now a son in full standing, adopted at your conversion. Now that you are a son in full standing, you are an heir. We are all heirs. We are all heirs of the promise to Abraham. We have been given one aspect of that promise, the Holy Spirit. Since we have received the Holy Spirit, we are now assured that God is our Father and we are His sons and daughters.

The Pointed Challenge

(v.8-11)

This is great truth to revel in. However, Paul is not just giving these truths to stir our souls. He is giving them as a medicine, as an antidote to counter the poison of works and Law keeping.

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. ⁹ But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? ¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years! ¹¹ I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

In Principle

(v.8-9)

Paul challenges them in principle. These words are primarily aimed at converted Gentiles, although the charge would stand against most Jews of his day. He points out that the Gentiles were also enslaved. They were enslaved to the false gods and religions. These false religions exist in the realm where the Law rules and demands obedience. These false religions are a part of the weak and beggarly elemental principles. In saying this, Paul has just put the Old Covenant Law keeping in the same category as false and pagan religions.

But now, they have come to know God, or rather, to place the cause before the effect, they are known by God. So, since they are no longer in the old, in the world, under law, why are they trying to go back to what is weak and worthless? To return to religion, whether it is Judaism or whether it is any other false religion is to go back to what is weak and worthless.

In Practice

(v.10-11)

What does this "going back" look like in practice? They are observing the Mosaic feast calendar! Now, some think this may refer to celebrating the pagan holidays. But that makes no sense at this point. Paul has been laboring to show that we are no longer under the Law and works. What they are doing is not only being circumcised, they are returning to the ritual of the Old Covenant. This is the symptom, among many others that he will deal with later, of their beginning to depart from Christ.

In the same vein, listen to how Paul states this in Colossians 2:16-3:4.

¹⁶ Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. [ESV]

Paul’s grave concern for them is that His labor in ministry will be brought to naught. He will have labored in vain if they stop living as though they are in Christ, in the New Covenant and start living as though they are in the Old Covenant. Paul is emphatic. The very thing they are going to in order to be God’s sons and to live holy lives has not value in dealing with the temptations of the flesh. What they are being told to do will not accomplish what is hoped. Now that Christ has come, to go back to the rituals and practices of the Mosaic Law is just the same as going back to false religions. Live not in the shadows of the old, but rather in realities of the new.

Reflect and Respond

What does this freedom that the gospel announces and that Christ brings mean?

Know that Christ has come and freedom is proclaimed. This is the freedom the cross brings. It is the freedom our crucifixion and our resurrection with Him brings. It is freedom from works. It is freedom from Law works. It is freedom from religious works.

Know that salvation is by faith alone. Our salvation and the faith that brings it are the sheer grace and free gift of God. There is nothing you can do, no work, no religious duty, do ritual, no righteous acts, no works of faith, no law keeping, nothing you can do. The call of the Bible is to believe and bow, to hear with faith. It is not a natural belief, but rather one given by God.

Revel in the fact that since you are in Christ, you are in union with Him and receiving all that He receives. You are a joint-heir with Him. All the promises of God will be fulfilled

for and in Christ. In your union with Him and in Him, you have all the blessings and bounty of all of God's covenants.

Be assured that those of you who believe have been made sons. You have been adopted and recognized as sons. How do you know this? Because the Word and Spirit have come to you. The Word is in your hearing and the Holy Spirit is in your heart. Through the Spirit's inward work you have an assurance in your heart and a confidence to call our heavenly Father, your papa.

Stand without wavering in Christ, in the New Covenant and in your sonship. Do not go back to the weak and worthless religions. Do not seek to be accepted by God by the Law or by works. Believe in Him.

Finally, there is a huge movement today to return to the Roman Catholic Religion or to Romish-like ritual in our worship and serving of God. As kindly as I know how to say this, if you, having started well by faith, go back to any other religion, you are in danger of damnation. Repent and return to your Redeemer. For the Bible says, "The just shall live by faith."

Hold fast to Christ. Rest in Him alone. Turn not away. Live truly as the sons of God.

Notes