
Freedom by the Gospel

Galatians 3:23-4:11

Introduction

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 Law. The Law has its place in God's past and present economy. But 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.

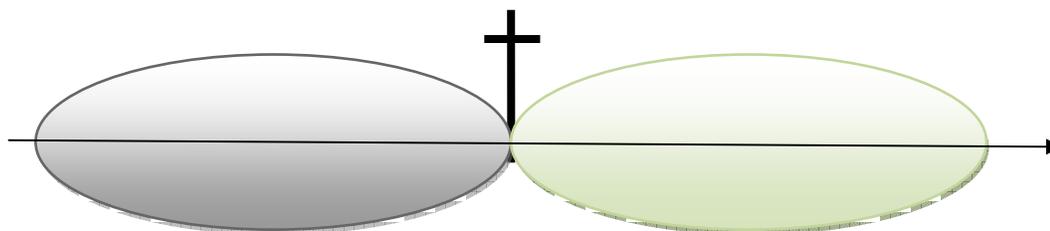
Two threads are interwoven through this text. These two threads are easy to observe and difficult to express. These two ideas I am going to represent through this drawing. Hopefully, you will be able to see as well as hear how the apostle connects these two threads.

The Redemptive History Thread

Woven through this text is redemptive history with Abraham, Moses and Christ coming. The cross is at the center of this line. The old is before the cross and the new is after the cross.

The Personal History Thread

Also woven through this text is the personal history of each believer. At the center is the coming of faith, or conversion. There is a parallel, or a correspondence with redemptive history. Before conversion, you are in the old under the Law. After conversion, you are in the new under grace.



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 nannies 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. 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, adopted in Greek, he was then called a son. Why this illustration? It vividly conveys the deep sense of the before and after, the old and new.

So, hear verse 22 as we move into our text this morning.

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. [ESV]

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

Under the Old

(v.23-24)

Under the old, the status and plight of all in the Old Covenant and all of us before conversion is given. Now remember, our two threads are interwoven here.

The first analogy is that of being imprisoned (v.23). The Law functioned, both in the Old Covenant and before our conversion, as a jailor. It kept people in custody. The “us” here refers historically to the Jews and personally to Paul. It was our jailor until the faith that was to come was revealed. When faith came and we believed, then we were set loose from our prison and released through our redemption.

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

It shows that we 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 affect on you personally. 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). The Law functioned as our guardian, our schoolmaster, our nanny until Christ came. Here, he is referring primarily to the historical thread. He is tell us a historical fact as well as a theological truth. The Law instructed sinners about sin until the sacrifice for sin came. Further, the Law did this so that, for this purpose, we 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)

Ah, but something grand takes place between verse 24 and 25. Faith has come. Now this certainly cannot mean, faith has come in history. He has just argued that Abraham was such a man of faith that we are to emulate him and his faith. No, this faith coming has to do with our personal history. So, until faith came, until it was given as an act of free and sovereign mercy and grace, each one of us was under the Law as our guardian. But when faith comes, when faith is given us⁸, then we are no longer under the guardian. Why?

We are no longer under the guardian because we are now 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 the 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 totaled 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 your 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. So 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)

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 into 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 into 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. It is evident that these elementary principles are the Law.

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 faith may enjoy some of the blessings and benefits reserved for later. The Law served to watch over Jews before Christ and over us before conversion so that we will be ready for the new.

As Sons in the New

(v.4-7)

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. Are just the Jews under the Law? No, all humanity is under the Law. Even those of us who were after the cross, are under the Law until we are converted. You can say it this way, only those under the Law can be redeemed. And they are redeemed from 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 develop-

ing, 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.

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 double enslaved. They were imprisoned under the Law and 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.

Conclusion 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

⁸ Clearly Paul is consistent in his wording here. Faith comes the same as Christ comes. It is a sheer gift from God. Faith is not a natural, innate function. While many people talk as though unbelievers can “have faith”, this is not the way the Bible talks. The faith that saves is not mere human belief elevated by God. It is an ability given by God. Without it, one may have all kinds of belief that will not and does not save. This is the point of the gospel of John. The Word of God is both the message to be believed and the method by which saving faith is granted.