

0319

Poverty, paganism, and the gospel

Galatians 4:1-11

Sunday, February 12, 2023

Announcement

-Joel and Esther Faulkner will be with us in two weeks on February 26.

-Don Stout

-Jane's letter

Text

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. 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.

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.

Prayer

Introduction

The gospel is a message which is simple enough that a child can understand it.

And so simple that adults often misunderstand it.

All people are invited to the cross of Christ, are invited to the throne of grace, are invited to receive the forgiveness and redemption that Jesus offers by faith in the gospel.

The Old Testament is the story of God's unfolding plan of redemption for the world, as it points to a savior of the world. The Old Testament largely focuses on a people of God: the Israelites. The New Testament has a broader focus than just Israel in pointing to a gospel that has a worldwide focus.

And so the focus in the New Testament isn't solely on the Israelites. But we see this distinction between two groups of people: the Jewish or Israelite people and the gentiles. And as I've pointed out many times, gentiles were non Jewish people. The New Testament sometimes calls gentiles "Greeks." And that's basically a catch all term for the non-Jewish world.

Through the gospel, we see that both groups are able to receive salvation and grace.

And I point this out because it's relevant to our passage today.

This passage is complicated. Maybe the most difficult in the Book of Galatians. Without question the most difficult that we've covered so far in this study.

And I think part of the reason why it's so difficult is that there are places in this passage where he's speaking to Jewish converts, and other places where he's speaking more to Jewish and gentile converts.

Because people of both of those backgrounds had come to faith in the gospel in the churches in Galatia. But new believers from both backgrounds were also at risk.

As I've said numerous times in this study: part of the reason why Paul was writing this book was that there were false teachers in the Galatian churches who were trying to get the new Galatian Christians to continue adding aspects of Old Testament law onto the gospel.

The problem is that adding law onto the gospel is believing in a different gospel, which is no longer the gospel.

As Paul had said at the beginning of this letter:

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Bridge

Our main point today is that: All are invited to be saved by grace, and it is grace alone which saves.

And we'll be looking at our passage in three parts today.

Life before Christ, life in Christ, and remaining in Christ. And with that, we come to our passage this morning. First point, life in Christ.

Life before Christ

Paul begins this section with an illustration. In the beginning of our time, I mentioned people coming to the gospel from both Jewish and gentile backgrounds. This first verse is speaking more to people of Jewish backgrounds.

Verse 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

Paul depicts the heir of a wealthy family. He has a vast inheritance coming to him, but in the ancient world, Paul is saying that before he received it, he's no better than a slave.

In other words, before receiving the inheritance, you're still broke. You just have the future promise of wealth.

He's comparing the heir to the Jewish people who had the promises the Lord had made to Abraham. They had the great riches and blessings of God's promises, but they were not yet realized until Christ had come.

Verse 2:

² but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

When Paul talks about guardians and managers, I take that to refer to the law of the Old Testament. Before Christ came, God's people were under the law as their guardian.

It's reminiscent of language Paul had used in chapter 3 when talking about the law.

3:24:

the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

And if you remember from a few weeks ago, I had talked about how wealthy Greco-Roman families would sometimes entrust their children to a chaperone who would be a teacher, a protector, and almost like a life coach, by our modern standards.

Verse 3:

³ In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

Paul says **we**.

I maintain that in verses 1-2, he's looking at this from a Jewish Christian perspective. In verse 3, I think Paul is including gentile Christians under this "we."

In a sense, Paul is resetting his metaphor.

In verses 1-2, the point is that the Jewish people were heirs of a great inheritance.

Verse 3 is saying that before the gospel, in a sense of spiritual maturity, all people - Jew and gentile alike - were like children.

And Paul says that they **were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.**

Like I said, verse 3 is a difficult verse.

What are the elementary principles of the world?

The key word to focus on is elementary.

Now when we say elementary in English, we're often referring to elementary school.

And some think that Paul means something akin to that.

I take elementary from the Greek to be referring to the elements.

Now if you've ever studied chemistry, you've seen the periodic table of elements.

In the Greco-Roman world, they didn't think of the elements quite so broadly. In their thought, the elements were earth, air, water, and fire. And in the Greco-Roman world, these were not only elemental to the natural world, but these were things which many worshiped as gods in their own right.

Pagan religion had a god of the earth, a god of the sky, a god of the seas, and even a god of fire.

Both Jewish and gentile converts had been enslaved by their former lives.

So for the gentile, that's what Paul means when he's saying that they were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

And for the Jewish convert, they had their own slavery, but under the law. That's not to say that the law was bad. But trying to earn righteousness through the law was bad, because it made someone a slave to trying to earn God and it imprisoned them by their own sin in failures to abide by the law.

3:22 says:

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

All are invited to be saved by grace, and it is grace alone which saves.

We come to our second point.

Life in Christ

Verse 4:

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,

The first 3 verses of this passage are not the most hopeful.

Verse 4 changes on a dramatic note.

But.

You were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

But.

when the fullness of time had come,

The fullness of time points to God's divine plan and sovereignty. There was nothing haphazard about the incarnation. God was working his plan for salvation throughout centuries, throughout different places, continuing to advance his plan through different people, different nations.

Throughout the Old Testament, constantly pointing forward to Christ.

And when the fullness of time had come, Christ came into the world.

John Stott says, “it was the time when the law of Moses had done its work of preparing men for Christ, holding them under its tutelage and in its prison, so that they longed ardently for the freedom with which Christ could make them free¹.”

God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law

There's so much to that phrase.

We are reminded that Jesus was sent. He didn't come from nowhere for no reason. He's the Son of God, which is reminding us of his divinity.

The fact that he was born of a woman is reminding us of Jesus' humanity.

Jesus is both fully man and fully God. It's necessary. It's because he is fully man that he is like us in our humanity. It is because he is fully God that he is worthy to reconcile us to the Father.

Even though Jesus is fully God, in his humanity, he was born under the law. He was born to a Jewish mother in a Jewish community and perfectly followed all aspects of the law.

First part of Verse 5:

⁵to redeem those who were under the law,

So he was born under the law and followed the law to redeem us, the people who could not follow the law.

God's standard is perfection. We cannot attain that on our own. Jesus did. And the gospel is Jesus imputing his perfection to us as if it were our own.

Because he's good, and because he's loving, and because he's gracious.

¹ John R. W. Stott, [*The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 106.

The unrighteous can be declared righteous through faith in the Son of God who lived a righteous life.

But as we talked about last week, he also grants us sonship.

Second part of verse 5:

so that we might receive adoption as sons.

This idea of adoption as a son of God is never found in the Old Testament. In that, we see that the blessings Christ brings, the grace he gives, the relationship with God that he gives so far exceeds what people had imagined under the law.

The law brought slavery and toil as people tried to earn God on their own.

Jesus invites you in with open arms to join him in fellowship, to be adopted as a child of God. You can't earn your way to being adopted. It's a gracious gift of a loving parent.

But that's what we see through the gospel.

Verse 6:

⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

Because you are sons.

Paul's stating it as a fact, because that's the status we enjoy in Christ.

And a result of this adoption and sonship is God gives us his Spirit.

In these three verses, we are seeing all three persons of the Trinity at work.

God sends the Son. Jesus follows the law so that we can be redeemed and adopted. And the Spirit indwells us. The passage says that the Spirit is in our hearts.

It is a change of the heart, it is a rebirth to have faith in Christ because we're given the Spirit of Christ.

When the text says that the Spirit cries "**Abba! Father!**"

Abba is the Aramaic word for Father. Aramaic was the language that Jesus spoke.

The point here is that the Spirit invites us into intimate fellowship with God. It's not something you can earn, or deserve or give yourself. It is purely the result of a good and gracious God.

The same Spirit who was at work in creation, the same Spirit who indwelt Jesus is given to every believer in the gospel.

Verse 7 is the result of what Paul has been saying:

⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

We have redemption through Christ, we have adoption as sons through Christ. And we have an inheritance through Christ.

In the Old Testament, the inheritance would have been the promises the Lord had made to Abraham.

And that's what Paul means here. That through Christ, we are heirs to those promises. The Lord made the promises to Abraham, but they're fulfilled through Christ, the ultimate offspring of Abraham.

We have a good God. And again, so many want to reject the gospel, reject the idea of grace and try to earn it. It's an offense to God. You can't earn what's freely given. When we try to earn God, we lose sight of the wonderful grace that he offers where fallen people can find belonging: as we're adopted into God's family. Where we can find grace as we're forgiven through Christ. And where we can receive blessings as we enjoy the inheritance as an heir of God's promises.

It's a gift of God, not an achievement of mankind.

We come to our third point.

Remaining in Christ

We've looked at life before Christ, which was the state of humanity apart from Jesus.

We've looked at the great blessings of life in Christ.

But we can be fickle. And Paul was concerned for the Galatian church as people had confused and led them astray with a message that was not the gospel. But this risk is not unique to their situation. It's a danger which we can all face. If we aren't being taught truth, if we aren't having the gospel preached, we will always be susceptible to being led into falsity.

Verse 8:

⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

So he takes us back to life before Christ.

And I'd argue that this is the state of all mankind apart from Christ.

Paul says enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

False gods. For the gentile Christians, many came from paganistic backgrounds where they were literally following false gods. For the Jewish converts, they had the law. But there was still the false god of self. And feeling like we're the ones in control of our own salvation, based on our own goodness.

Our world has lots of false gods. Money, success, freedom, our hobbies.

None of those things are bad. But as John Calvin said, "the human heart is a factory of idols."

We can take things that are good and make them our masters. The elemental principles of the world are good things. Earth, sky, wind, water. Those are all good. We need them all.

But they are not our gods.

If you're not worshiping Christ, you will ultimately look to something or someone other than Christ for your sense of security, for your sense of belonging, for your sense of hope. And that will become your god.

And as I said, that's the state of all mankind apart from Christ.

And so in verse 8, Paul is saying that's where they were. In verse 9, he's concerned that people are falling back into that way of life.

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?

Let us not fall back to our old habits, our old idols.

Paul once again uses the language of the elementary principles of the world. He calls them weak and worthless. In terms of saving you, they are powerless.

Specific to the Galatian church, the risk of this was through people trying to impose the Old Testament law onto the gospel.

Earlier in this letter, Paul had also talked about them trying to impose dietary restrictions and circumcision.

Here, he gives the example of how the false teachers were trying to impose the Old Testament calendar on new believers.

Verse 10:

¹⁰ You observe days and months and seasons and years!

They were imposing a Saturday weekly Sabbath, imposing the holy days of the Old Testament, the festivals: Passover, the Day of Atonement.

And at the end of passage, we can see Paul's frustration with it all.

Verse 11:

¹¹ I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Perhaps a bit hyperbolic. Because obviously it was not in vain that he shared the gospel. But we see throughout this letter that Paul's heart is broken for these churches who have been led astray by a false gospel.

Conclusion

We should be rejoicing in the truth of the gospel, not resorting to law and trying to make our relationship with God about our own goodness.

We are not our own saviors.

And when we live like we are, there are really two places that's coming from. Either it's a person who never believed in the gospel in the first place. Maybe they made a false conversion. But that person is still dead in their sins.

But for the person who really has believed in the gospel, to resort to works, you miss out. You miss out on a fuller relationship with God. You miss out on more fully worshipping God. You miss out on beginning to truly appreciate the greatness of God's grace.

The gospel is a message which is simple enough that a child can understand it.

And so simple that adults often misunderstand it.

I close with two thoughts from this passage. And at heart, they're related. The first is a drum I've been beating which is what we cannot earn salvation. We cannot work for God's love. This passage is another one where we see this point stressed. It's like it's our default setting that we always want to resort back to works and to being good enough.

A thought I had this morning is that perhaps part of that is some of us make our own love conditional and transactional that we assume God's the same way.

He isn't. God loves us with a perfect love, and we have a perfect savior.

The other thought is that this passage is pointing to Jewish and gentiles coming to faith. This passage is a reminder that all people are invited to receive grace.

Without Christ, we're just as lost as our unbelieving family member, or friend, or neighbor, or coworker. Instead, let us remember that the grace that saved us can save them too. The life we've found in Christ, they can know too.

The cross is where life is found. Let us not keep that a secret. Let us share it with others. Let us not be ashamed of the truth but willing to share.

Communion

In a moment, we're going to take communion.

Luke 24 gives one of the three gospel accounts of the Last Supper.

¹⁴ And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. ¹⁸ For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹ But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. ²² For the Son of Man

goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!”²³ And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this.

And at this time, if the deacons who are serving could come forward please.

Communion points to the work of Christ. His body broken for our sins, his blood shed for our sins.

We partake of communion not because it's saving us.

But to remember the Lord who brings salvation.

But as Jesus said when he instituted communion, it is also given as a sign of the new covenant.

Throughout our passage, I talked about people trying to impose the Old Testament onto the gospel. Trying to impose the old covenant. When we take communion, let us remember that we have a savior who brings a new covenant.

Let us pray.