

GALATIANS—WEEK 3

BREAKING THE SHACKLES



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Galatians, Week 3 — From Slaves to Sons
The Cover Picture is Peter and Paul by El Greco (1541–1614)
It depicts the confrontation described in Galatians 2:11.

Paul generalizes his argument against circumcision to include all ritualism. He also zooms in on the sonship issue and makes being a son of God the true objective.

Paul also ramps up the affectionate tone of this letter. He leverages that to support his case.

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T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

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1 Galatians 3:21–25

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

The key to unpacking this passage is exegeting the Greek in, “*But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*”

The Greek word translated as “confined” (συνέκλεισεν, soon-ek-lei-sen) means enclosed, imprisoned, closed up together. The first half of the sentence is saying that Scripture has bundled everything under sin.

The second half of the sentence is a purpose construction in Greek. It literally reads, “[for the purpose] *that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*” That’s why Scripture bundled everything under sin.

So, bundling everything into one big sin package means that Christ taking our sin for us completely delivers righteousness and keeps the promise. So, with that clarified, we can now treat the whole passage.

Is the law then against the promises of God? Obviously not, as no law *could have given life* and righteousness. Instead, everything is bundled under sin so that Christ can take it all in one gulp.

Before, the law kept everything *for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor* [the Greek word (παιδαγωγόν, pai-da-go-gon) means tutor, guardian, custodian, guide] *to bring us to Christ.*

In other words, the law kept the bundle intact, ready for Christ. The last half of that sentence is another purpose construction in the Greek—[for the purpose] *that we might be justified by faith.*

And, of course, *after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor/guardian/custodian/guide.*

The law gets a gold watch and is dispatched into retirement.

Of course, this retirement refers to the ceremonial law, not the moral law. Right is still right, and wrong is still wrong. It’s just that keeping kosher has lost its crown.

The gist of the passage is graduation. We’re no longer under the tutelage of a guardian. Faith in Christ makes us functionally adults.

Adults are more useful to God, but with adulthood comes responsibility. We now function as ambassadors. This highlights how important the moral law still is.

Under the law, our salvation was the issue. Now it’s God’s glory, which is much more important.

2 Galatians 3:26–29

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Paul is closing out his “sons of Abraham” logic here. He’s also closing out the possibility of a misunderstanding. The problem is that the whole sons of Abraham thing can sound sexist, classist, and racist.

So Paul explicitly rules that out by explicitly equating ethnicities, classes, and sexes. Curiously, he says, “*neither Jew nor Greek*,” instead of, “neither Jew nor Gentile.” Since the Galatians aren’t in Greece and may not identify with the Greeks, Paul obviously isn’t just speaking to them.

This is intentional. By using an “off axis” example, Paul forces it to be general.

The same goes for “*slave nor free*.” Paul doesn’t say, “rich nor poor,” “healthy nor sick,” or, “strong nor weak.” He doesn’t need to, *for you are all one in Christ Jesus*.

But Paul’s strongest point is that being a son of God trumps being a son of Abraham. *For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus*. This makes being an ethnic son of Abraham seem insignificant.

Finally, Paul delivers the coup de grâce. They’re *Abraham’s seed* anyway, by virtue of being in Christ, and thus *heirs according to the promise*.

Imagine someone getting circumcised after reading this.

Paul’s declaration of equality in Galatians 3:28 might be history’s most radical statement. Even now, it’s impressive. Back then it was absurd.

But then Galatians 3:29 takes it to the next level. Paul goes beyond just making everyone equal; he makes them all heirs.

It’s like the line, “We’re all equals, but some are more equal than others.” Treating everyone with dignity and respect is nice, but treating them as co-heirs is another thing entirely. No one expects to share their inheritance with all their “equals.” The math-joke version of this would be, “We’re all equal, but not *that* equal.”

Of course, this isn’t about divvying up the family farm; it’s about the covenant promise to Abraham.

That’s serious only if you take it seriously, but that must be the case here.

Otherwise, one wouldn’t even be thinking of getting circumcised.

3 Galatians 4:1–7 (ESV)

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, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

This passage amplifies Paul’s point about being heirs in two significant ways.

First, Paul turns up the volume by describing a child being under the tutelage of *guardians and managers* as being like slavery. Importantly, it’s “we” who “*were enslaved.*”

But this time, Paul describes it in more general terms than just the law. It’s *the elementary principles of the world* that enslaves. There’s some uncertainty around the exact meaning of the Greek word that’s translated as *elementary principles* (στοιχεῖα, stoichea). It can mean elementary spirits or even just elements (back then the elements were air, earth, fire, and water).

While the meaning of stoichea is unclear, the passage is not. They were enslaved. The Jews were enslaved under the law, but Gentiles were enslaved under something more like superstition or pagan religion or even pagan science. It doesn’t make that much difference which one it is. It’s likely a combination.

In any case, in the *fullness of time* Jesus came to redeem us, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

But here’s the kicker; that’s a purpose construction in the Greek. This is Paul’s second amplification and it’s a biggie. Jesus came to redeem us, [for the purpose] *that we might receive adoption as sons.*

The purpose of redemption is adoption! It isn’t just to save us. Our adoption is central to what it’s all about. It forms the foundation of the logical progression that Paul uses to wrap up this passage.

Because we are adopted sons, *God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”*

Thus, *you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir.*

We praise the plan of salvation, but mostly because we make out so well.

Its glorious structure is what we should be praising.

Humans seem to have the attitude that God has to save us. We’re just so cute or something. Thus, not saving us is ridiculous. That’s why many people cannot stomach the doctrine of hell. To them it’s absurd.

Losing that attitude is a big part of becoming truly humble in Christ. We all deserve hell.

And it’s a perfectly reasonable option.

4 Galatians 4:8–11 (ESV)

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. 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? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

This has an emphatic feel in the Greek. Paul is worried about these guys. This is confirmed by the concluding sentence, “*I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.*”

The Greek word translated as “*you turn back*” (ἐπιστρέφετε, *epistrepnete*) is in the present tense and active voice. Also, the Greek word translated as “*how can*” (πῶς, *pos*) is used emphatically.

Thus, together they convey more of a sense of, “*How is it possible that you are returning ...?*” Paul is amazed that they would even consider turning back to *the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world*.

But the evidence is undeniable. *You observe days and months and seasons and years!* Yeah, but what’s wrong with that?

This could be a reference to the ceremonial timetable mentioned in Leviticus 23. Or Paul might be referring to pagan worship practices based on celestial cycles. That was anything but rare back then. Either way, Paul is right to call this, “*weak and worthless elementary principles of the world.*”

He should be worried.

Notice that this passage doesn’t mention circumcision. Paul seems to have moved on.

Not really. Circumcision and these rituals are both forms of relapsing back into slavery.

While the Galatians weren’t throwing virgins into volcanoes to try to make it rain, these observances were still useless attempts to be *enslaved to those that by nature are not gods*. That’s just nuts.

Okay, but now comes the hard part—recognizing how we’re just as bad.

Just as lapsing into circumcision has much in common with lapsing into rituals, our lapsing into useless things has much in common with their lapses. Like moths to a flame, our sinful nature pulls us away from service to Christ and towards slavery to silliness.

But our slaveries are in a broader spectrum. Sometimes we act like salvation is to be found in politics. Or we’re owned by our TV sets. And don’t get me started on the meaninglessness of sports.

The list is endless. Our society is an ocean of spam and clickbait, and our sinful proclivities make us easy targets.

What meaningless things pull you away from the truly important?

5 Galatians 4:12–16

Brethren, I urge you to become like me, for I became like you. You have not injured me at all. You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?

The phrase, “*You have not injured me at all,*” makes it sound like his *physical infirmity* was due to something that happened while Paul was in Galatia, and he’s making it clear that it’s not their fault.

But that’s not it. The Greek word translated as injured (ἠδικήσατε, ay-dik-ay-sah-te) means “treated someone badly.” The ESV translates it as, “You did me no wrong.” This is not about physical injury.

The Galatians treated Paul like royalty during his *trial* with his *physical infirmity*. So, Paul praises them effusively, saying things like, “*you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me.*” This passage is one of many that indicate that Paul’s failing eyesight was a big part of his story. Paul being blinded on the road to Damascus might have even been the beginning of that.

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. — 2 Corinthians 12:7

See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand! — Galatians 6:11

For many of his epistles, Paul used an amanuensis (scribe), but at least for some of this one, he made a point of writing it in his own hand. That may have become impossible later as his eyesight worsened.

So, it seems likely that Paul’s *physical infirmity* was his eyesight. Somehow, it was because of that infirmity that he *preached the gospel to you at the first*. He was stuck there and spent the time preaching.

Gloriously, their reaction to this near blind preacher in their midst was not to *despise or reject* him, but to receive him *as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus*.

God’s hand in this is so totally evident—and glorious. Paul’s stuck in Galatia by what looks, at first glance, to be a terrible affliction. But something clicks, and they see Paul as some kind of blind seer.

And so it turns into a love story between a pastor and his flock.

The warmth of that love story is evident throughout this epistle, but it reaches a crescendo here. So Paul, ever the preacher, leverages that to continue to make his case.

Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?

That’s a little strong, but these folks are used to Paul’s style.

And they love it.

