

Galatians

Under the Law or in Christ?

Galatians 3:23-29

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Under the Law or in Christ?

Scripture

Becoming a Christian was for me a great liberation. At nineteen years of age, the Holy Spirit started convicting me of my sin. I became acutely aware that I was breaking God's law. Finally, when God gave me new life in Jesus Christ, I was set free.

This is what the apostle Paul writes about in our text for today. By the way, much of the material for today's sermon comes from John Stott and his commentary on Galatians. Let us read Galatians 3:23-29:

²³ Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

²⁶ You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:23-29)

Introduction

The well-known Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe has written these words: "In the Old Testament, we have the *preparation* for Christ; in the Gospels, the *presentation* of Christ; and in the Acts through Revelation, the *appropriation* of Christ."¹

He is right. The Old Testament is a preparation for Christ, with its prophecies, ceremonies and institutions that point forward to him.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL; Victor Books, 1989), 704.

There may be a further way in which the Old Testament is a preparation for Christ, and the apostle Paul may have had that in mind in the section of Galatians we are studying together today.

He has just indicated that God gave Abraham a promise in an unconditional manner. The promise to Abraham was that he would have right standing before God, and also that God would give him the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, when Moses came on to the scene of redemptive history and was given the law 430 years *after* the promise was given to Abraham, that law could nullify the promise that God made to Abraham. In fact, the law could not give anything to anyone, other than a sense of sin and transgression, for the law was not given for life or righteousness (cf. 2:21; 3:21).

Therefore, if a man was to be justified before God, he could not be justified by the law. Only through the Abrahamic promise could life be found, and that promise had now found its ultimate fulfillment in the coming of Abraham's true son, Jesus Christ.

Thus, there is a progression from the promise to Abraham through the law to the fulfillment of the promise in Christ. In a sense, then, the preparation of the Old Testament for Christ becomes the biography of every Christian man. He comes to Christ through the experience of conviction of sin brought about by the truth found in the Law of Moses.²

Everybody is living either in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, and derives his religion either from Moses or from Christ. In the language of this paragraph, he is either "under law" or "in Christ."

My favorite Bible commentator, John Stott, writes:

God's purpose for our spiritual pilgrimage is that we should pass through the law into an experience of the promise. The tragedy is that so many people separate them by wanting one without the other. Some try to go to Jesus with first meeting Moses. They

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 95.

want to skip the Old Testament, to inherit the promise of justification in Christ without the prior pain of condemnation by the law. Others go to Moses and the law to be condemned, but they stay in this unhappy bondage. They are still living in the Old Testament. Their religion is a grievous yoke, hard to be borne. They have never gone to Christ, to be set free.”³

Lesson

Both stages are depicted here in the passage before us today. Verses 23-24 describe what we were under the law, and verses 25-29 what we are in Christ.

I. What We Were Under the Law (3:23-24)

First, let's notice what we were under the law.

Our condition of what we were under the law can be described in one word: *bondage*. The apostle uses two graphic word pictures to describe the bondage we were in when we were under the law. The first picture is of a prison (verse 23), in which we were held captive, and the second picture is of a tutor (verse 24), whose discipline was harsh and severe.

A. A Prison (3:23)

Paul says in verse 23, **“Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed.”**

The law is pictured as a prison. We were incarcerated and we could not escape. We were on death row awaiting the execution of our sentence. And we were kept on death row by the law of God.

You see, the purpose of the law was to make us realize our helpless condition. Nothing could be done for us until we realized that we were held prisoners by the law.

³ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

Charles Wesley was born in 1707, the 18th of 19 children! He pursued the Anglican priesthood at Oxford and, like his brother John, was a member of the Holy Club at Oxford. The Holy Club consisted of a group of students who were intensely concerned about spiritual matters. If ever a group of people worked hard at trying to earn God's favor through obedience to the law, it was these men. They ministered to the poor of the city through Bible studies and mercy ministries.

At the age of 29, Charles Wesley became ill. He was recuperating from his illness at a friend's home when John Wesley was converted through the reading of Luther's preface in his commentary on Galatians. Three days after John's conversion, Charles was also gloriously converted. It is believed that immediately after his conversion he wrote one of my favorite hymns titled, "And Can It Be." In this hymn one stanza clearly shows that Charles Wesley understood the picture of the law as a prison. He writes:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

The law is like a prison. It keeps us on death row. And until we recognize our dreadful condition and turn to Christ, we shall die under the judgment of condemnation on death row.

B. A Tutor (3:24)

The second picture Paul uses of the law is that of a tutor. The apostle Paul says in verse 24: **"So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."**

The English phrase **"was put in charge"** is a translation of the Greek word *paidagogos* (παιδαγωγος). The *paidagogos*, or tu-

tor, was a trustworthy slave who escorted the family's child to school, stayed during the session, and saw him safely home again. A boy from a wealthy family might also have one or more slaves carry his bag and writing tablets for him.

The tutor was usually elderly and almost always a person of good character. He was a moral and physical guard for the child, a companion, an advisor, and a director. The boy called him "Master," and the tutor had the right to punish the boy with a cane, which he often did.

And so the tutor was a disciplinarian and not an educator. His duties ended when the boy put on the toga and became an adult.

In this picture the law was like a tutor. Its function was to discipline us and to lead us to Christ. The law had no other function than to take us to the One who could set us free. But just as a tutor was never intended to be permanent, so the law was never intended to be permanent. God gave us the law in his grace to make the promise of salvation more desirable.

So, what were we under the law? We were in bondage. The apostle Paul describes us as being in prison and under the oversight of a tutor.

II. What We Are in Christ (3:25-29)

Now, let's observe what we are in Christ.

Now that Jesus Christ has been revealed as our Savior, and we have placed our faith in him, what is our relationship to the law? Are we still in bondage?

Praise God—no! Verse 25 says, **"Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law."**

Through our faith in Christ, our prison door has been opened and our tutor has been retired. We are free, gloriously free!

But where does that leave us? Are we now alone in the world, forced to fend for ourselves? Not at all. As Paul explains, we have become new members of God's family, united in equality,

and heirs of an ancient promise. Let's probe each of these practical truths.

A. *We Are Sons of God (3:26-27)*

First of all, we are sons of God.

Paul says in verses 26-27, **“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”**

Everyone who comes to God on his terms, that is, **through faith in Christ Jesus** becomes a son of God. There are no exceptions. All who trust in Christ as their Redeemer become full-fledged members of God's everlasting family. Of course, without faith in Jesus, no one can have an intimate relationship with the Lord.

When we become **sons of God**, God is no longer our Judge, who through the law has condemned and imprisoned us. God is no longer our tutor, who through the law restrains and chastises us. God is now our Father, who in Christ has accepted and forgiven us. We no longer fear him, dreading the punishment we deserve. We love him, with deep filial affection.

Notice that the apostle Paul says that we become **“sons”** and not **“children”** of God. The word **“sons”** is carefully chosen. It is intended to show that while we were under the law we had no status before God. But when we put our faith in Jesus Christ we attained to a new position in the family of God, much like the ancient Roman child did once the tutor was retired.

When a male son became of age (somewhere between the ages of 14 and 17), it was marked by a special ceremony. No such special ceremony marked a girl's passing into womanhood. But when a boy reached maturity, he discarded his crimson-bordered toga, the *toga praetexta* that boys wore. In the presence of the entire family he received a pure white toga, the *toga virilis*, and was received into the counsels of the family hierarchy. He took his

place as an adult son, enjoying all the privileges of that relationship.

It is important to note that the sonship of God is **“in Christ.”** It is not in ourselves. The doctrine of God as a universal Father was not taught by Christ nor by his apostles. God is indeed the universal Creator, having brought all things into existence, and the universal King, ruling and sustaining everything he has made. But he is the Father only of our Lord Jesus Christ and of those whom he adopts into his family through Christ. If we would be sons of God, then it can only be **through faith in Christ Jesus.**

Verse 27 talks about **baptism**, which visibly sets forth our union with Christ: **“for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”** Paul does not mean that **baptism** unites us to Christ. He wrote this letter to counter the false teaching of the Judaizers who were insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Paul knew enough theology to know that baptism is merely the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament circumcision. It is faith that secures union with Christ, while baptism signifies that union outwardly and visibly.

B. We Are All One in Christ Jesus (3:28)

Second, we are all one in Christ Jesus.

In Christ we belong to God (as his sons) and to each other (as brothers and sisters). And we belong to each other in such a way as to render to no account the things that normally distinguish us, namely race, rank, and gender.

I am sure that Paul had in mind one part of the morning prayer that devout Jewish men prayed. They would pray, “I thank you, God, that I am not a Gentile. I thank you, God, that I am not a slave. And I thank you, God, that I am not a woman.”

Paul now realizes that these distinctions are gone, and that is why he says in verse 28, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”**

Let’s look briefly at the eradication of these distinctions.

1. **There is no distinction of race**

First, there is no distinction of race.

Paul says, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek”** (3:28a).

All racial distinctions and prejudices are meaningless in the body of Christ.

We are equal, equal in our need of salvation, equal in our inability to earn or deserve it, and equal in the fact that God offers it to us freely in Christ.

Once we have received it, our equality is transformed into a fellowship, which can only exist in Christ Jesus.

2. **There is no distinction of rank**

Second, there is no distinction of rank.

Paul says, **“There is neither . . . slave nor free”** (3:28b).

Nearly every society in history has developed a class or caste system. Circumstances of birth, wealth, privilege and education have divided men and women from one another.

But in Christ snobbery is prohibited and class distinctions are rendered void.

3. **There is no distinction of gender**

And third, there is no distinction of gender.

Paul says, **“There is neither . . . male nor female”** (3:28c).

This remarkable assertion of the equality of male and female was made centuries in advance of its times. Women were nearly always despised in the ancient world, even in Judaism, and often exploited and ill-treated as well. The gospel strikes at the heart of the distinction between male and female, making all people equal in Christ.

A word of caution must be added here. This great statement in Galatians 3:28 has often been misused in support of the conten-

tion that in the Church no distinctions regarding gender in Christian service are justified. That is clearly not the apostle's point here. Racial, social, and gender distinctions are clearly continued in some sense in the New Testament. The apostle refers to *spiritual blessings in Christ*, specifically to *union with him*. There is no distinction in regard to *relationship*. However, there is a distinction in regard to *role* in the Church, just as there is a distinction in regard to *role* in the family and in the State.

C. *We Are Heirs according to the Promise (3:29)*

And finally, we are heirs according to the promise.

Paul says in verse 29, **“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”**

If we belong to Christ, then we are Abraham’s seed. And, if we **are the seed of Abraham**, we are **heirs according to the promise** made to Abraham.

Doers of the Law of Moses are rejected. Believers in the promise of God are received.

Our union with Christ makes us spiritual children of Abraham. We join the ranks of all the people who believed before us.

And so John Stott says, “No longer do we feel ourselves to be waifs and strays, without any significance in history, or bits of useless flotsam drifting on the tide of time. Instead, we find our place in the unfolding purpose of God. We are the spiritual seed of our father Abraham, who lived and died 4,000 years ago, for in Christ we have become heirs of the promise which God made to him.”⁴

Conclusion

Galatians 3:23-29 is the most upbeat portion of Paul's letter we've studied so far. In keeping with its spirit, let's turn our application into words of praise.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

A. Praise God for the prison

First, praise God for the prison.

The law brought us to the end of ourselves, forcing us to face our condition squarely.

Thank the Lord for letting you know that you were on death row. Thank the Lord for providing this humanly inescapable penitentiary. Without it, we may never have realized how much we needed his grace.

B. Praise God for the Tutor

Second, praise God for the tutor.

Like the *paidagogos* of old, the law helped keep us in line, restraining sin while it guided us toward our liberator—Jesus Christ. Thank God for giving us this goad to salvation.

C. Praise God for the Savior

And finally, praise God for the Savior.

With his own blood, Christ made it possible for us to become united with the Father and all believers past, present, and future. Through faith we have been set free to serve and enjoy the living God. Let's not take our redemption for granted—rather, let's turn our eyes toward heaven and with humble gratitude, praise Christ for what he has done for us. Amen.

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equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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