

“FROM SLAVERY TO SONSHIP”

In this section of Galatians, Paul has been addressing the question that he asked of the Galatians back at the beginning of chapter 3: “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” He has been laboring to show the Galatians that their conversion to Christianity did not come by keeping God’s law but by hearing the gospel and responding to it with faith. And in order to convince them of this, he has drawn a sharp contrast between the law and faith. As he said in Galatians 3:12, “the law is not of faith.” The law is summed up by the phrase “Do and live,” while faith is summed up by the opposite phrase: “Live and do.” This way of thinking about the contrast between faith and the law is especially helpful because it reminds us that the gospel is neither legalistic nor licentious. As Christians, we are called to live for God, but we do so by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us.

The contrast that Paul makes between the law and faith is a redemptive historical contrast, a contrast between two different eras in the historical unfolding of God’s plan of redemption. In contrasting the law with faith, Paul is not saying that Old Testament saints were saved in a different manner than New Testament saints. There is only one covenant of grace, one way of salvation, but it is administered differently at different points in the historical unfolding of God’s plan of redemption. This is helpfully summarized in two paragraphs from our Westminster Confession of Faith, where it says the following:

“[The covenant of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.

“Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.” [WCF 7.5-6]

As the Confession says, the Mosaic law was an administration of the covenant of grace. But this raises a question about the sharp contrast that Paul draws between the law and the gospel. How could Paul say that “the law is not of faith” when the law was actually

an administration of the one covenant of grace, a covenant in which the only way of salvation is by faith alone? We find an answer to this question in the passage we are looking at tonight, a passage in which Paul further explains the purpose that was served by the law before the coming of Christ. And as he explains this, he sets a contrast between the status of believers before the coming of Christ and their status after his coming. *God's children have moved from the status of slavery to that of sonship.*

Our passage begins with the use of an analogy, as Paul likens the situation of God's people under the Mosaic law to that of an heir under guardians and managers until he comes of age. In title, the heir is the rightful lord over everything, but he is not yet lord in fact. He is under the supervision and control of his guardians until he comes into his inheritance. Paul uses this analogy to explain the situation of the Jews under the law. He says in verse 3, "In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved by the *elementary principles of the world.*" What are these "elementary principles of the world"? Paul uses this phrase again in 4:9, where the context suggests that it refers to the practices of the Galatians in their former life of paganism. But in verse 3, Paul's use of the pronoun "we," along with his discussion of the law in the following verses, indicate that these "elementary principles" refer to the situation of the Jews under the Mosaic law prior to the coming of Christ. So we see that these "elementary principles" were a part of the experience of both Jews and Gentiles before the coming of Christ. This tells us that Paul is using this phrase to refer to a legalistic religious principle that was active for Jews under the Mosaic law and for Gentiles in their pagan religions.

For the Jews, the Mosaic law, with its promise of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, had a legalistic principle in it because of how it reminded God's people of the broken covenant of works. Some Reformed theologians have even said that the Mosaic law, while being an administration of the covenant of grace, was also in a sense a "republication" of the covenant of works. Proponents of this way of conceiving covenant theology, such as Michael Horton and T. David Gordon, argue that when the law was given at Sinai, the Lord was using Israel to demonstrate, in a typological manner, what had happened to Adam in the garden. God placed Adam in the place that he had prepared for him and gave him a command to keep. In the same way, he placed Israel in the place that he had prepared for them and gave them his laws to keep. Furthermore, God promised Israel that if they kept his laws, they would enjoy long life in the land that he had given them, just as he had promised life to Adam upon condition of his obedience. And Israel's failure to keep the law led to a repetition of what happened to Adam after his sin. They were driven out from the place where God had caused his presence to dwell with them. That being said, the Mosaic law was not merely a reenactment of Adam's failure. It also foreshadowed God's gracious promise of a Savior who would deliver God's people from the curse of the law and bring them back into fellowship with God. Whether or not one is comfortable with referring to the law of Moses as a typological republication of the covenant of works, there is no disputing the fact that the law showed the people of Israel their need for Christ. As Paul said back in chapter 3, the law imprisoned everything under sin until Christ came.

As for Gentiles, their idolatrous religions also functioned under a legalistic principle. This is how every non-Christian religion functions. They are all, in one way or another, works-oriented. And the works that they require of their adherents are their “elementary principles.” Man-made religions have laws that are created by men on the basis of their understanding of the natural law, which is the sense of right and wrong that God has woven into his creation. This is what Paul is talking about in Romans 2:14-15 when he says,

“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.”

While the Gentiles did not have access to the special revelation that was available to the people of Israel in the Mosaic law, their systems of religion were based upon their understanding of the natural law. Paul uses the concept of the “elementary principles” to describe the works-principle that enslaved both Jews and Gentiles before the coming of Christ. In this sense, both Judaism and paganism were built on the same legalistic foundation.

Even though the law of Moses was an administration of the covenant of grace, Paul says that it held the people of Israel captive until the coming of Christ. It functioned like

a guardian over an heir before the heir comes of age. It was restrictive, but its restrictiveness was intended to protect the covenant people until Christ came. But now that Christ has come, this restrictiveness is no longer necessary. The period of the law's guardianship has come to an end. This is what Paul is talking about in verses 4-7. *There are three things that I want to point out in these verses. The first concerns the timing of Christ's coming, the second has to do with way in which Christ came, and the third tells us the purpose for which Christ came.*

First, concerning the timing of Christ's coming, Paul says that it came about "*when the fullness of time had come.*" Christ came into the world at the perfect moment in human history. God had so ordered the affairs of the world that the circumstances were just right for the coming of Christ and the spread of the gospel. The conquests of Alexander the Great had resulted in the use of Greek as a common language throughout the Mediterranean world. The rise of the Roman empire had ushered in an era of peace, as well as vast improvements in roads and travel conditions. And there are a number of other things that could be pointed out. God sent Christ when the time had fully come.

Second, Paul tells us a number of things about the way in which Christ came. And the first thing that he says is that *God sent Christ* into the world. This language is significant because it indicates that Jesus existed as the Son of God prior to his incarnation. He is the eternal Son of God. He has always existed as such.

Next, Paul says that Jesus was *born of a woman*. He took on our full humanity at his incarnation. And it was absolutely necessary for him to do this in order to serve as the

Redeemer of God's elect. Jesus could only serve as our Redeemer because he is the God-man. As John Stott notes,

“If [Christ] had not been man, He could not have redeemed men. If He had not been a righteous man, He could not have redeemed unrighteous men. And if He had not been God's Son, He could not have redeemed men for God or made them sons of God.” [*The Message of Galatians*, 106]

The next thing that Paul says about how Jesus came into the world is that Jesus was *born under the law*. By taking on our flesh and blood in his incarnation, Jesus obligated himself to fulfill the law of God. And that is what he did. He did everything that the law required, and then he bore the curse of the law in his suffering and death on the cross.

Lastly, *the reason why the Father sent his Son into the world was to redeem those who were under the law and make them into sons of God*. Jesus purchased us out of our condition of being enslaved to the law and caused us to be adopted as God's children. And on the basis of his finished work, he sends his Spirit into our hearts to assure us of our status as the children of God. And this is not something that only happens to a select group of Christians. It is something that is given to every Christian. As Calvin puts it, “no man is a Christian who has not learned, by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, to call God his Father.”

Here is Paul's basic point in this passage: now that Christ has come, those of us who trust in him have come into our inheritance. We are sons and daughters of God. We are no longer under the guardianship of the law but have been set free to serve the Lord as grateful children. And as I close, I want to say one final thing about our status as children of God. Notice what Paul says here about how we experience and express our sonship. He says that we cry out, in the power of the Spirit, "Abba! Father!" The primary way to cultivate and enjoy your relationship with your heavenly Father is in your prayer life.

Listen to one more quote from Calvin, who writes:

"It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father...[N]othing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayer...[I]t is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us." [*Institutes*, 3.20.1]

It is an unspeakable blessing to be an adopted son or daughter of God in Jesus Christ. Those of us who have received this blessing are no longer enslaved under the law. We have been set free and made heirs of God. But the only way to take full advantage of this blessing is by regularly crying out to our heavenly Father in a life of prayer.