

## “Paul: to the Galatians”

*Galatians 1:1-10; Galatians 3:23-4:7*

### **The Letters Begin**

By AD 50 or earlier, some of the churches that Paul founded in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) were under attack from false teachers and he pulled no punches in responding. One of the biggest issues that faced the early church was the struggle between Jewish Christians and Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians. Because Christianity began as a movement within first-century Judaism, many Jewish-Christians believed that in order to become

a Christian, a Gentile must live under the law of Israel. For male converts, this would mean circumcision. For all converts, this would mean keeping the Sabbath, obeying the Jewish dietary laws, and so on.

But in all his writings, Paul is clear that Christians are marked out *only* by their faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 4). Paul taught that even the Old Testament heroes, such as Abraham, were reconciled to God by their faith – not by the works of the law. Further, Paul taught that this faith is received by God’s grace alone and that it eliminates all traditional distinctions before God – “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSV). In the early church, Paul’s teachings carried the day, and were endorsed in about 50AD by an important council of Christian leaders in Jerusalem. Christians could keep the Jewish law if they wished, but it was not to be required.

### **The letter to the Galatians**

This letter is probably the oldest of Paul’s letters that we have in the New Testament. Evidently, false teachers had come to Galatia preaching that both faith in Jesus Christ and adherence to the law of Moses are needed to be reconciled with God. Paul is profoundly disappointed that these churches have succumbed to false teaching (yes, heresy!) and he is very combative in this letter. In contrast to Paul’s letters to other churches, there is no general word of thanksgiving for the churches in Galatia. Instead, Paul quickly sets the stage for the rest of the letter – “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.” (Gal 1:6-7, NRSV). So far as Paul was concerned, there simply was no other Gospel than the one that he had brought to the Galatians. The question for us is this: what is the problem and how could it matter so much?

### **The “circumcizers”**

Most New Testament scholars agree that the problems in Galatia were created by Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping the Jewish Law (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath, and the rest) was necessary to become a full-fledged disciple of Jesus. In other words, to become a true Christian, one first needed to become a Jew. This may seem an odd claim to make, but we need to remember that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. All the apostles were Jewish. Jesus said he had come to fulfill the Law, not abolish it (Matthew 5:17-20). It isn’t hard to imagine that these “circumcizers” could weave together a persuasive case that Jesus-followers in Galatia should keep the Law.

To say that Paul was angry is an understatement. The letter-writing protocol of the day called for every letter to open with a somewhat lengthy introduction expressing praise and thanksgiving for the letter’s recipient. All of Paul’s letters begin in this way – with the exception of his letter to the Galatians. All niceties are set aside. Paul wastes no time getting to the point: “I can’t believe your fickleness – how easily you’ve turned traitor . . . it is not a minor variation, you know, it is completely other, an alien message, a no-message, a lie about God” (from Peterson’s *The Message*).

*“ . . . who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God . . . ”*

Paul could cram a lot into a few words. In these three phrases from 1:4, Paul sums up all that the “circumcizers” are undermining. For Paul, Jesus’ faithfulness all the way to the cross, his willing gift of himself, is what has put us right with God – that and nothing else. The cross is the means by which we are liberated from the present age of sin and death so that we might enter into the age of the Spirit. And all of this is the plan of God.



For Paul, to return to the Law was to return to slavery, to forsake the redemption offered by Jesus' atoning death. The Law had fulfilled its purpose of leading everyone toward the Messiah. The time for the Law, as the thought-to-be means of salvation, had passed.<sup>1</sup> Paul writes that he "died to the Law so that I might live for God" (2:19, TNIV). Paul had passed from the old to the new, from death to life, and there could be no going back. Not for him, not for any of the Christians.

### ***Why it matters***

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, this Good News that Paul brought to Galatia and we are to bring to the world, is a proclamation, an announcement. The Gospel is not a dry recitation of doctrine interesting only to theologians. It is a trumpet that calls people to the God-Who-Is.

The Gospel proclaims truth. The Gospel claims that some things are true and some are not. The Gospel proclaims that there is one God who created everything only to see it damaged and twisted by human rebellion. The Gospel proclaims that through the faithfulness of God's one and only Son, even to the cross, humanity and all of creation has been put right with God. The work is not done, but the victory has been won. And how do we know this? Because the Gospel proclaims not only Christ crucified . . . but Christ risen.

Some of the Galatians had been torn away from the Gospel of Christ by false teachers, the wolves about which Paul would later warn the elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:29). It cannot surprise us that the dangers of false teaching is a theme in all of the later New Testament writings. We stake our lives on the truthfulness of the Gospel. Of course it matters.

### **Heirs of the inheritance**

These new Christians in Galatia (after all, Christianity was all new at the time) don't really grasp the work that God has done in them. Paul urges them to remember the gifts that God bestowed on them, beginning with the Holy Spirit. Paul's message to them is, "You are new creations; now act like it!"

In one of today's passages from the letter, he uses the analogy of minors, heirs, and inheritance to make his point. In chapter 3 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses two images to talk about the law and its place prior to Jesus. First, he depicts the law as a jailor, who locked up the prisoners and kept guard over them until Jesus came to liberate them. Paul also pictures the law as a custodian, who took care of God's children, showed them how to live, and disciplined them.<sup>2</sup> Similar to a nanny.

Moving into chapter 4, Paul mixes two metaphors. Paul begins with the image of an heir. Then, as now, fathers would set up estates for their children and appoint guardians or trustees who would control the estate until the children had come of age. Unlike today, under Roman law children with a guardian had the legal status of a slave. In Paul's metaphor, it is God the Father who has set up the estate. The law is the guardian. It is all humanity who has lived as minors, as slaves even, under the guardianship of the law,<sup>3</sup> bound to the "elemental spirits of the earth" (v. 3).

But . . . in an act of cosmic significance, God has intervened . . . the time has been fulfilled (Mark 1:14) . . . the minors have become of age . . . the slaves have been freed. How could this be? Paul explains to the Galatians that God has sent his own son -- quite human (born of a woman) and quite Jewish (born under the law) -- who has "redeemed"<sup>4</sup> humanity, so that everyone might be adopted as God's children. Here, Paul introduces his second metaphor, that of adoption. This becomes a little clearer when we remember that Paul is writing to Christians who had not been Jewish; the adoption language would have been especially meaningful for them -- as it is for us. Jewish-Christians would have seen themselves as having received their inheritance by birth. But Paul makes clear that Gentile-Christians could claim adoption into God's family . . . from a slave to a child (adopted or otherwise) to an heir. Whether born a daughter or adopted as a

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<sup>1</sup>It isn't that the Law is bad. After all, just think of the Ten Commandments. What is wrong with loving God and loving neighbor? Obviously, nothing. It is how Jesus calls us to live. The Law is good but, because of sin, it could not be the means by which the promises made to Abraham are fulfilled. Only faith can put things right. Next week, our reading will be drawn from Deuteronomy 6 and we'll have more time to talk about the Law.

<sup>2</sup> From C.B. Cousar's commentary on Galatians in the *Interpretation* series.

<sup>3</sup> There is a larger sense of the law as well. Paul understood that the essence of the law is written on the hearts of all people; that our consciences tell us to love the Creator and one another (see Romans 1:18-32). Thus, in the larger sense, Paul can speak of all humans being slaves under the law.

<sup>4</sup> In the Old Testament, there were kinsmen redeemers who would buy back relatives from debt and slavery. The Lord God Almighty is portrayed as the redeemer of Israel, delivering Israel from its enemies. Jesus Christ is never referred to as the Redeemer. Instead, Jesus is the means of our redemption from sin. The biblical language of redemption is all bound up with slavery and freedom, bondage and deliverance.

daughter, Paul sees no distinction before God. By sending his Son to free us from our prison, God has brought both Jew and Gentile into his newly created family.

### ***Experiencing Our Adoption***

This “legal” adoption is not the end of Paul’s story. God sent his Holy Spirit to us as the sign and pledge of our adoption into God’s family. As Cousar writes, “Just as an orphan taken into the home of foster parents may initially mistrust or at least wonder about the reception given by the new parents and may require some gesture to get over the feelings of being an outsider, so God’s adopted children move about in fear until the Spirit operates at a deep level ‘in our hearts’ to corroborate not once by repeatedly the reality of the Father’s love.” Clearly, we are to understand and find great joy in the intimate relationship we enjoy with God.

### ***Yes, God’s children and heirs***

So . . . we are in direct relationship with God. We are dressed in the adult wardrobe of faith. We are in Christ’s family. We are the descendants of Abraham. We are the adult heirs of God, sisters and brothers, and the inheritance due God’s heirs is ours. John Stott helps us to understand the implications of being heirs to the promise made to Abraham.<sup>5</sup>

We have seen that in Christ we belong to God and to each other. In Christ we also belong to Abraham. We take our place in the noble historical succession of faith, whose outstanding representatives are listed in Hebrews 11. 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.

These, then, are the results of being ‘in Christ’, and they speak with powerful relevance to us today. For our generation is busy developing a philosophy of meaninglessness. It is fashionable nowadays to believe (or to say you believe) that life has no meaning, no purpose. There are many who admit that they have nothing to live for. They do not feel that they belong anywhere, or, if they belong, it is to the group known as ‘the unattached’. They class themselves as ‘outsiders’, ‘misfits’. They are without anchor, security, or home. In biblical language, they are ‘lost’.

To such people comes the promise that in Christ we find ourselves. The unattached become attached. They find their place in eternity (related first and foremost to God as His sons and daughters), in society (related to each other as brothers and sisters in the same family) and in history (related also to the succession of God’s people down the ages). This is a three-dimensional attachment which we gain when we are in Christ—in height, breadth and length. It is an attachment in ‘height’ through reconciliation to the God who, although radical theologians repudiate the concept and we must be careful how we interpret it, is a God ‘above’ us, transcendent over the universe He has made. Next, it is an attachment in ‘breadth’, since in Christ we are united to all other believers throughout the world. Thirdly, it is an attachment in ‘length’, as we join the long, long line of believers throughout the whole course of time.

Further, it is not that we are going to be heirs, we are heirs now -- already. We may not act like God’s heirs much of the time, but that is who we are. If I had to act like an heir to be an heir . . . well, let’s just say that the inheritance would forever elude my grasp.

Paul’s point in this passage is larger than just the true identity of the Galatian Christians. He reminds them of their own experience of God’s Spirit, which is the evidence and guarantee of their new life in Christ. Nonetheless, many of them still look to the keeping of the Jewish law as the mark of their salvation. They don’t fully realize that the arrival of Jesus Christ freed them from the curse of needing to keep a law that they could not keep. Because God gave them the Law, they know sin in a way that other peoples do not.

In Christ, who was himself born under this nanny, the Law, so that he could free us from the custodian’s care, we, in Peterson’s graceful paraphrase, “experience our rightful heritage.” And our heritage is that we are new creations, made alive in Christ. As heirs, we have a new status: we are God’s children, sisters and brothers, living in bonds of Spirit-forged unity.

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<sup>5</sup> Stott, J. R. W. (1986). *The message of Galatians: Only one way* (pp. 101–102). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. (The deity pronouns are the author’s.)