

# Religions of Bondage

*Galatians 4:1-7*

*With Study Questions*

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Now I say *that* the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, <sup>2</sup> but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. <sup>3</sup> Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. <sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. <sup>6</sup> And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" <sup>7</sup> Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

## **A Tenuous Relationship**

The first job I ever had (other than a paper-boy) was as a busboy at a restaurant on the Redondo Pier. I was about twelve and made \$1.25 per hour. One day I wandered from my post to buy some ice cream only to return to find my boss wiping dirty tables. He fired me. It suddenly dawned on me that relationships can be a bit tenuous. You see, I had done worse things than that at home, but my parents never sent me packing the way my boss did.

The slave works for wages, the son inherits riches. The slave lives in fear of being cast off, the son will never be cast off. Paul is seeking to instill in his readers a sense of peace with God based upon their sonship.

This sonship is grounded in the redemptive work of Christ rather than the religious efforts of men. In fact the religious efforts of men are, or should be, designed to reveal the impotence of any human effort at obtaining God's favor. Sadly, the religious system itself often becomes man's effort at pleasing God rather than God's revelation of His Son.

## **Some Historical Context**

In order to make sense of this passage before us, some historical context may be necessary because Paul is writing to people who aren't merely transitioning from unbelief to belief, but from the old covenant to the new covenant. This can be confusing.

## **Old Covenant Saints – Strong but Lacking**

The old covenant, with all its priests and animal sacrifices, though full of grace and promise, merely foreshadowed Christ. It would be wrong to say, however, that those men and women of faith in the Old Testament were

somehow lacking in terms of personal power and conviction. The Spirit of God was mighty upon them. Calvin states the obvious,

**When we look at the matchless faith of Abraham, and the vast intelligence of the holy prophets, with what effrontery shall we dare to talk of such men as our inferiors? Were not they rather the heroes, and we the children? To say nothing of ourselves, who among the Galatians would have been found equal to any of those men?<sup>1</sup>**

There was, though, a sense in which the saints of old were lacking – primarily they were lacking in regard to the full revelation of the person and work of grace. Paul writes of Christ,

**For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9).**

## **Law and Grace**

The old covenant was also the full expression of the law and attending fear.

**For the law was given through Moses, *but* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17)**

**Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw *it*, they trembled and stood afar off. <sup>19</sup> Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:18, 19).**

Though there was grace in the old covenant, it was the full expression of law. And though there is law in the new covenant, it is the full expression of grace.

## **Apostate Israel**

We must also understand that during the time of Christ, God’s covenant people (Israel) had all but abandoned the true message found in the multitude of sacrifices and rituals, i.e. the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup>Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ga 4:1). Ages Software: Albany, OR

We add this to the fact that the law was no longer a minister of fear – leading them to trust in what the sacrifices represented – instead, as we learn from Jesus, these people were confident in their own righteousness. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer begins with a description of the audience.

**Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others (Luke 18:9).**

### **Unbeliever to Believer or Old Covenant to New?**

I mention all this to clarify and, hopefully, solve an apparent difficulty in the passage under our examination. Is the Apostle Paul merely trying to bring faithful believers from the old covenant method of worship into the new covenant method of worship? This couldn't be the case since in 4:8 Paul reminds them of that previous time when they did not know God and worshiped (not merely in the old covenant method) false gods.

Neither is Paul purely writing to people who were not saved but now are. He is writing to people who were under the guardianship of the old covenant Mosaic sacrificial system (3:23; 4:1).

### **Dead Religion**

I believe Paul is addressing a group of people who were wrapped up in a mystical, religious, ceremonial straightjacket that had a death grip on their conscience. They were in the midst of the truth but had not the truth. Through Paul's ministry they had come to know and embrace the truth of Christ at a time when the old covenant Mosaic ceremonial economy was no longer of any use.

But for some reason they found it very difficult to let go of that which, though it had the form of religion, did not provide any life, light, or freedom from the due penalty of sin and guilt.

### **Salvation in the New Covenant**

Paul is concerned both with their justification before God, but also with their enjoyment of the full expression of God's grace in the new covenant. He writes,

**Now I say *that* the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, <sup>2</sup> but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father.**

**<sup>3</sup> Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world (Galatians 4:1-3).**

## The Fetal Church

In the old covenant, the church was in its fetal stage. It had the necessary nutrition and was already God's child, but it didn't have the full light of the child who has been born. It does seem that for a time the baby would actually prefer the womb to the light of the delivery room. In one respect, this is what Paul is writing against; the influence of those who sought to keep the child in the womb—to keep the child in a state of childhood, which he compares to slavery.

## Gone and Perverted

In the old covenant, the gospel was confined to the womb. It would not reach out to all nations. And the system of worship was very difficult with its sacrifices, washings, circumcision, etc.

But let us keep in mind that Paul is not only dealing with the transition from old to new covenant. He is also dealing with people who had so perverted that old system that instead of it revealing Christ as the way, the system itself became the way of salvation.

We read, I think quite clearly, of Paul alluding to the transition between the old and new covenant periods in the following verses.

**But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,<sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (Galatians 4:4, 5).**

## Fullness of Time

The fullness of time might mean when Israel had reached a certain level of apostasy or when Rome had reached a certain level of power or both. The birth of Christ, according to God's timing, was to be the turning point in history. The conception of the church, if you will, would now transition into the birth of the church and the world would never be the same.

## Under the Law

Christ was born under the law and kept the law perfectly in every way. The full expression of the law, which was given to Moses, was a law that revealed the necessity of the shedding of blood to satisfy the justice of God. It also revealed, in great detail, what true righteousness actually was. It was under this administration that Jesus was born and He walked in absolute and thorough perfection.

Jesus successfully met God's righteous demands and therefore was able to redeem those who were under the law with no ability to save themselves. It was by this work and this work alone that we receive the spirit of adoption and are called sons of God.

**And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"<sup>7</sup> Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ (Galatians 3:6, 7).**

Because we are His sons, He has sent His Spirit into our hearts crying out "Abba, Father!" This is a cry of intimacy – a cry of "daddy!" Christians are to think of themselves, not as slaves, but as sons and heirs.

### **Slavery of Freedom**

Religion can still be a source of slavery rather than a message of freedom. Many of our friends are still enslaved to the trappings of religious systems that keep their peace with God in question; the obvious example being Rome, where the believer is seeking to minimize their time in purgatory. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states,

**All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.<sup>2</sup>**

One wonders how intense that purification must be in light of what the Bible says is the due penalty for sin. In the blockbuster, *Braveheart*, the purification undergone by William Wallace would be a mere pittance compared to what one owes God. But the enemies of Paul's efforts are not merely restricted to Rome. Just this week I received an e-mail from an evangelical-anti-Calvinist (if there be such a thing), who, writing against the perseverance of the saints, asserts

**Finally, on a more practical notion, despite the hermeneutical attempts of Reformed theologians, the classic doctrine of the perseverance of the saints represents a surrender to theological pessimism in that it is extremely difficult to see how it can seriously motivate their daily walk in holiness...**

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), p. 268.

In other words, if God is granting me the assurance of my justification before Him based upon His good pleasure and the work of Christ alone, why would I bother trying to be good? God must therefore, leave a sufficient amount of doubt in my soul in order to supply motivation. The Apostle John disagrees.

**These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may *continue to believe* in the name of the Son of God (1 John 5:13).**

The assurance of eternal life is a valuable component in my encouragement to persevere.

Marx said that religion was the opiate of the masses. In other words religion was the way to keep people sedate and in their place. Conversely, this brand of religion is the amphetamine of the masses. It supposedly leaves us motivated. But of course neither Marx nor Arminius are correct.

### **Promise of Sanctification**

Christians are justified (declared righteous before God) by the blood of Christ alone. Having been justified by the blood of Christ, the promise of God is that they will be sanctified (walk in holiness) as well.

**Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. <sup>26</sup> I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*. <sup>28</sup> Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God (Ezekiel 36:25-28).**

The promise is that those who are cleansed by Christ will, subsequently, seek to walk in the statutes of God. This is not done by monasticism or asceticism (forms of self-denial and monk-like rituals); nor is it done by the threat of purgatory or the fear of losing one's salvation. It is done by the Spirit of God.

Seminaries are bending over backward trying to figure out how to form more holy spirits in Christians. But perhaps the problem is not that Christians aren't being instructed properly in the disciplines, perhaps they are simply not hearing the gospel. After all, God promises that justification will be followed by sanctification.

## Questions for Study

1. What should religious practices of men primarily achieve (page 1)?
2. What advantages do new covenant saints have over old covenant saints (page 2)?
3. Discuss the old covenant versus the new covenant as it relates to love and grace (pages 3, 4).
4. How did apostate Israel misuse religion (page 4)?
5. Is Paul writing to those who were unbelievers and are now believers or is he writing to those who were under the old covenant versus the new covenant or both (page 3)?
6. What had the old covenant rituals turned into (page 4)?
7. What does Paul mean by “the fullness of time” (page 4)?
8. Why was it important to mention that Jesus was born under the law (page 5)?
9. Discuss “Abba, Father” (page 5)?
10. How can religion be a form of spiritual slavery? Give examples (page 5).
11. Why is important to know that we’re saved and will persevere in faith by grace alone (page 6)?
12. Discuss God’s promise of sanctification (page 6).