

No Longer Bound

Isaiah 61:10-11 | Psalm 45:10-17 | Galatians 4:4-7 | Luke 1:46-55

GALATIANS 4:4-7

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

INTRODUCTION

I went to the Austria Center Vienna at 7am to get a COVID-19 *schnelltest*, as I do most Sunday mornings. Now you might be thinking: 'Well, that maybe wasn't necessary, but okay.' But, there was a point in time when it was *legally* necessary. For gatherings, like church services, or after travel and to break quarantine, testing was an official government requirement. But after I was vaccinated, it was no longer mandatory. Now of course, there might be some very good reasons for me to get tested: If I felt like I might have been exposed, an abundance of caution with the delta variant, because I actually like some of you. Now, whatever your position on testing is, I think we can all agree, a *bad* reason is that I'm keeping the law. If the people at the ACV asked why I wanted to get tested: 'Hey what brings you in today? COVID-19 test. Are you vaccinated? Yes. Have you been exposed or are you having symptoms? No. So why are you getting tested? It's the law...' If I said that, they'd look at me like I'm crazy because that law is no longer binding on me.

Well, this is the very interplay going on in our Galatians reading. Paul, in explaining the benefits of the gospel for those who believe, reminds us that our relationship with the law—has fundamentally changed. We need not be bound anymore. But make no mistake, this is a nuanced argument. So, let's take a deeper look.

1. SLAVES

First, what does he mean by law? We need a little context for this.¹ For the Jews, even when God freed them from slavery in the Exodus and brought them to their inheritance of the Promised Land, they were still bound by the law he gave them at Sinai.² But, and this is interesting, this is also true for the gentiles. Before coming to Christ, gentiles were captive to, and this is an interesting phrase from the previous passage—the "*elemental spirits of the world*."³ Like the law for the Jews, gentiles were bound, they were enslaved by—and we are still enslaved by—the

¹ As I noted last week, it is quite difficult to separate a passage in an epistle from what comes before it—the literary context—as Paul argues quite logically. In this case, the opening of our passage—"But when the fullness of time had come" (Gal 4:4)—indicates that it is building on something: "My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world" (Gal 4:1-3). Paul is using a metaphor to describe an initial state of humankind. Until they come of age, heirs are under the direction of guardians and trustees. They are, in a way, no better than servants to the legal system until they are old enough. They may be owners by promise, but they are slaves in practice. In the Roman civil law of the time, an heir would be completely under guardianship until the age of 14, and still under some form of supervision until the age of 25. On this point in Roman history, see Timothy Keller, *Galatians For You*, (Epsom, England: The Good Book Company, 2013).

² Paul cites this in detail in Gal 3:10-29.

³ Gal 4:3.

basic principles, cultural metanarratives, philosophies—the laws—that undergird our society. There are the old spirits of the world: ‘Money will solve your problems. Sex is the best you’ll ever feel.’ There are newer ones as well: ‘Who you want to be matters more than who you are, there’s only good people and bad people and right and wrong and no middle ground or nuance, your emotions are more trustworthy than your capacity for reason, etc.’⁴ We operate our lives based on these ideologies. We make decisions based on them. And so, what Paul means by law is those institutions that govern our moral lives, judge us, and to which we are enslaved.

2. RECIPIENTS

But, and this where Paul challenges the idea: As Christians, we are the blessed recipients of promised redemption in Christ Jesus. That’s how he starts. “*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.*”⁵ Christ Jesus came into the world. He broke into human history and was born of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He was born under the law, under the elemental spirits of the world, a human, and so a slave. And yet, he perfectly kept the law. No other person could do that. All humanity was bound by the law, meaning they were condemned by the law. Our sinful nature—that *original sin* thing I’ve talked about a few times—means that we are slaves to the law, perpetually confined by it and yet unable to actually keep it, always rebelling against God in our flesh, always giving in to temptation and to evil, always needing to repent, and so always in judgment under the law.

Yet, Christ Jesus redeemed us. That’s the word Paul uses: *redeemed*. He paid the fine we were given, the penalty we deserve. Our sin requires the payment of a life, and Jesus Christ not only came into the world as a slave, but he kept the law, he transcended the elemental spirits of our world, and then redeemed us by giving his life, by dying on a cross.

And what was the effect of that redemption? Paul continues: We received adoption. We became the children of God. In Christ, God’s Son, we became sons, children.

3. HEIRS

But, why does it matter if we are children of God? Well, Paul outlines two consequences of being adopted as God’s children. They are there in the last verse. We are given the Holy Spirit (in contrast to the spirits of the world) and the privilege of calling God our Father (verse 6) so that (verse 7): “*you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.*” That is, firstly, we are no longer slaves to the old system, and so, we need not live as slaves to the sinful nature. We are no longer judged by the law, accountable to its constraints, bound by its rulings, enslaved to its requirements. We have been redeemed. We are free from the binding of the law and the servitude of the elemental spirits, philosophies, and ideologies of our day. Rather, and this is the other side of that coin of freedom, secondly, we are heirs, not slaves, but heirs—responsible to Christ who redeemed us and to our father, as his children. This is what Paul will go on to unpack in the rest of the letter, especially in the next chapter—the fruit of the

⁴ These last two, along with ‘you must avoid bad experiences no matter what,’ are the premises argued against in a fascinating book: Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Ideas and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (Penguin, 2018).

⁵ Gal 4:4-5.

Spirit we are given, as heirs, is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”⁶

And here is the nuance. *These things may not look very different.* To keep the Old Testament laws can be, a lot of the time, a good thing. It can be a wise thing: not murdering or stealing or lying, but honouring God or honouring the sabbath. The law of Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, a right understanding of obedience as Christians, as heirs, will look a lot like keeping the law. There are good reasons to keep the law, even when it is not binding, just as there are good reasons to get a COVID test even when there is no legal obligation. Or to put it differently, we may be easily forgiven of transgressions of the law if we are genuinely repentant. We are not bound by those laws (in a spiritual sense—the Austrian police may still enforce them), we are not prevented from God’s forgiveness. But just because we are not bound, it does not mean that we should do those things. What does it say to Christ, who redeemed us, for us to continue transgressing the law?⁷

What’s the difference? Let me see if I can state it as plainly as possible. The difference is not what we do, so much as who we are and why we do what we do? We are not slaves any longer. We need not live as slaves, as those bound by obligation, keeping the law for some benefit. We are heirs, free to live in our inheritance, obeying the law not as a prerequisite, but as a privilege, the privilege of being God’s children. Why would we want to live as slaves when we are the children of God? And this is precisely what Paul goes on to ask:

Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?⁸

We need not live as slaves. And that may be a new idea to some of you. You may think that Christianity is a religion that has some rules and requirements—you do good things and try your best to not do bad things, definitely don’t do anything really bad, and God will appreciate the effort and then you will be saved. If that is what you think—that this is about being a good person to be accepted by God, just know, Paul is telling you that you are living as a slave. You will always feel the weight of the law or our late modern ideologies—or at least you should—and yet, you could be living as an heir. Don’t miss out on God’s grace. But, live in a way that honours him, that demonstrates his love and care for his people, not out of obligation, but out of satisfaction in, and gratitude for, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Maybe today is the day that you are freed from the weight of the law, repent of your sins, stop living like a slave to them, and now strive to live out of thankfulness, out of blessed joyfulness in Christ Jesus? Maybe today is the day you experience God’s grace for the first time or the first time in a long time, in quiet prayer, in participating in this Communion meal, in fellowship with one another, in hope.

CONCLUSION

Born in London in 1725, John Newton was a man who lived under the weight of law. Having renounced his faith as a young man, he joined the Royal Navy. Not long after, he deserted the

⁶ Gal 5:22-23.

⁷ Paul explores these ideas, famously, in his letter to the church in Rome. See Rom 6:1-23.

⁸ Gal 4:9.

navy and was traded to a slave ship, beginning a somewhat notorious career as a slave trader. But during a violent storm, he began to ponder a question—even with all this structure and all these rules, he was still a morally corrupt person. He wondered: ‘Am I redeemable? Am I worthy of God’s mercy?’ In the following years, he left the slave trade and gave himself to serve the church, often preaching about his own experiences and temptations with sin, something quite uncommon for Anglican clergy.⁹ And what made that difference for him? Years later, he would try to capture it in a hymn, one that I think Paul, as he wrote Galatians 4, would have found appropriate. And with this, I will close:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

The hymn goes on a little later:

The Lord has promised good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
He will my Shield and Portion be,
As long as life endures.¹⁰

Let me pray: Heaven Father, we thank you for claiming us as your children through the death and resurrection of your Son. Help us to live as your children no longer slave, but heirs. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁹ For more on the life of John Newton, see Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), and Bernard Martin, *John Newton: A Biography* (London: William Heineman, 1950).

¹⁰ John Newton and William Cowper, “Amazing Grace” (1772).