

In the Fullness of Time

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. – Galatians 4:1-7 ESV

Here in chapter four, Paul continues to contrast law and grace. More specifically, he will show how faith alone is the means by which men must be saved. And to make his point, he uses yet another analogy. He has already compared the law to a jail, imprisoning everything under sin (Galatians 2:22). He also referred to it as a guardian, watching over us and managing our affairs until Christ came. The Greek word he used was παιδαγωγός (*paidagōgos*), which “was applied to trustworthy slaves who were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys belonging to the better class” (“G3807 – paidagōgos – Strong’s Greek Lexicon (KJV).” Blue Letter Bible). Here in chapter four, he uses the term, “guardian” again, but it is a different Greek word. It is ἐπίτροπος (*epitropos*) and it referred to “one to whose care or honor anything has been instructed” (“G2012 – epitropos – Strong’s Greek Lexicon (KJV).” Blue Letter Bible). It was commonly used to refer to a steward or overseer of one’s estate or children. Paul also compares the law to a manager. He uses the Greek word, οἰκονόμος (*oikonomos*), which referred to a steward, manager or superintendent, who was responsible for overseeing the affairs of another (“G3623 – oikonomos – Strong’s Greek Lexicon (KJV).” Blue Letter Bible).

In Paul’s day, this guardian or overseer was appointed by a father and given the responsibility to care for his child and oversee his well-being and manage his inheritance. This, as Paul points out, was to be the arrangement “until the date set by his father” (Galatians 4:2 ESV). In a sense, the son was no different than a slave as long as he was under the responsibility of his guardian or steward. He was expected to do exactly what the guardian told him to do. He had no access to his inheritance, except through the guardian, who managed all his affairs. He was under the watchful eye of his guardian at all times, until the day set by his father arrived.

Paul tells his readers that this was their former situation. They were under the guardianship of the law until faith came (Galatians 3:23). Up until the time that Jesus came, they had been “enslaved to the elementary principles of the world” (Galatians 4:3 ESV). Paul does not explain what he means by this phrase, but it most certainly conveys the idea of the limited understanding available to men without the help of God. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:12 ESV). Without the Spirit of God in them, men cannot understand the truths of God. They are incapable. Paul went on to say, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly

to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14 ESV). Those without Christ are limited in their understanding. They are stunted in their understanding, incapable of grasping the truth about God or the mysteries of spirituality. In speaking of the coming Holy Spirit, Jesus told His disciples, “He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn’t looking for him and doesn’t recognize him” (John 14:17 NLT). Paul also said that “God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom” (1 Corinthians 1:21 NLT).

Man, no matter how smart he may be, cannot understand or comprehend the truth regarding God. He is “enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.” But Paul reminds his readers that, “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son” (Galatians 4:4 ESV). At just the right time, according to His eternal plan, God sent Jesus “to redeem those were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:5 ESV). The amazing thing is that God, in His mercy and kindness, chose to adopt those who were not even His own. The audience to whom Paul was writing was made up primarily of Gentiles. They had not been part of the chosen people of God. They were outsiders, aliens and strangers to the family of God. Paul told the Gentile believers in Ephesus, “remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12 ESV). But he went on to tell them the good news that “you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19 ESV).

The amazing thing, Paul tells his readers, is that they were now sons and daughters of God. Because He had sent His Son into the world, “born of woman, born under the law” (Galatians 4:4 ESV), and His Son had kept the law to perfection, He had qualified Himself to be the sinless substitute to die in the place of sinful men. He took our place on the cross and died the death we deserved, so that we might be redeemed and restored to a right relationship with God. And those who place their faith in Christ become sons of God and receive the Spirit of God, which gives them the right to call on God as their Father. They are miraculously transformed from slaves to sons. They become princes, instead of paupers, and heirs of all the riches of God’s grace. But Paul’s point was that none of this was possible through the keeping of the law. Sonship was not achievable through hard work. The inheritance was not accessible through diligent rule-keeping. It was the gift of God made possible through faith in the Son of God and His sacrificial death on the cross. Man cannot earn a right standing with God. He cannot merit God’s favor through hard work. In fact, Paul will go on to say that, before placing their faith in Christ, his audience didn’t even know God (Galatians 4:8). They had been incapable of knowing God. They were enemies of God. And so were we. You cannot pursue that which you do not know. Natural man cannot know the things of God. Sinful men cannot seek the things of God. But God, in His great mercy and kindness, sent His Son to make Himself known.

No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us. – John 1:18 NLT

Known By God

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. – Galatians 4:8-11 ESV

There is a common belief, even among evangelical Christians, that all people are seeking after God. But the Bible seems to paint a distinctively different picture of mankind. Ever since the fall, humanity has been on a trajectory away from God, not toward Him. Men have not been seeking after God, but for anything and everything but Him. They have sought to make their own gods. Adam and Eve knew God intimately and personally. They had a daily and uninterrupted relationship with Him. But after the fall, they found themselves cast out of His presence. And the further mankind got from Eden, the more distant their recollection of God became. Paul paints a vivid picture of this fading knowledge of God in his letter to the Romans:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. – Romans 1:21-23 ESV

God's character was visible through His creation. Paul writes, "his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20 ESV). But as time passed, men began to lose their perception of God and their ability recognize His attributes in the world He had made. They lost their knowledge of God and began to create gods of their own. They worshiped the creation rather than the creator. They even worshiped other men.

But Paul reminds the Galatians that they have had their knowledge of God restored. But it was not something they had achieved. It was not as a result of their own searching or seeking. He emphasizes the fact that they have come to be known *by God*. It was God who had sought them out and not the other way around. He had chosen to know them and have a relationship with them. He had determined to make Himself known to them through His Son. As the apostle John put it, "No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us" (1 John 1:18 NLT). As a result of placing their faith in Jesus Christ, they had come to know God for the very first time. Up until that point, they had been "enslaved to those that by nature are not gods" (Galatians 4:8 ESV). They had been worshiping false gods. They had been limited in their spiritual understanding and were stuck worshiping the "weak and worthless elementary principles of the world" (Galatians 4:9 ESV). Their spirituality was of this world and not of heaven. While thinking they were seeking and coming to know God, they were actually moving away from Him.

But God had chosen to seek them out. He had called them to Himself and opened their eyes so that they could see the truth found in His Son's death, burial, and resurrection. For the first time they had been able to see the depth of their own sin, the hopelessness of their condition, and their need for a Savior. Rather than attempting to earn their way into God's good graces, they relied on the grace of God as expressed in the finished work of Christ. But Paul was concerned that these very same people, who had discovered the secret of justification by faith in Christ alone, were allowing themselves to become enslaved again. They were listening to the false teachers who were preaching justification by works. Suddenly, grace was not enough. The death and resurrection of Christ was insufficient. More was required. Human effort was necessary. But Paul completely disagreed.

There were those who were trying to convince the Gentile converts in Galatia that they were not truly saved unless they became circumcised and began to keep all the Jewish rituals, feasts and festivals. That is what Paul means when he refers to observing days and months and seasons and years. These outsiders were convincing the Gentile believers that their salvation was incomplete. They needed to do more. Their faith in Christ was insufficient. And it was this false teaching, a form of legalism, that Paul stood so strongly against. He would not tolerate it or allow it to take root among the churches in Galatia. Earlier in his letter to the Galatians, Paul had stated his amazement at how quickly and easily the believers there had turned their back on justification by faith alone.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. – Galatians 1:6-7 ESV

There was no other gospel. There were no other requirements. The salvation offered by God was not based on human effort, but on faith in Christ alone. The works of men had never made God known to them. Self-righteousness had never earned anyone access to God. The righteousness God required was only available through faith in Christ. As Paul told the Romans, "For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, 'It is through faith that a righteous person has life'" (Romans 1:16-17 NLT).

We don't seek God. He seeks us. We can't earn God's favor. He must willingly extend it to us through His Son. When it comes to our justification before God, self-effort is self-delusional. We would do well to remember the personal testimony of Paul to the believers in Philippi: "I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith" (Philippians 3:9 NLT).

Christ Formed in You

Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. – Galatians 4:12-20
ESV

It would be easy to read Paul's letter to the Galatians and simply assume that his sole motivation was to defend his particular interpretation of the Scriptures. But Paul was not just promoting his own doctrine over that of someone else. His goal was not to prove himself right and all others wrong. His objective was far more selfless and loving than that. He was out to see his readers experience the fullness of God's love for them. He wanted them to grow up in their salvation and enjoy all that God had in store for them. And he was willing to do whatever it took to see Christ formed in them.

Paul was writing from the perspective of a pastor, not an academician. He was interested in heart change, not mere head knowledge. But Paul knew that an accurate knowledge of God and an understanding of true doctrine was essential to spiritual growth. False doctrine produces fake fruit. An improper or faulty view of God always results in a god of our own making. Truth is not relative. It is not up to our own imaginations or the insights of men. God has given us His Word in which He has revealed Himself to man. It contains divine insights into His character, will, relationship with mankind, outlook on sin, redemptive program and future plans for the world.

Paul had come to the Galatians, lovingly preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to them. He had taught them the truth regarding their own sin, their state of condemnation before God, and His gracious offer of salvation and justification through faith in Christ. He had taught them the truth and they had gratefully received it. And Paul had done this while suffering from some undisclosed physical ailment. But he had not let his health interfere with his efforts to evangelize and disciple the lost in Galatia. Perhaps this "bodily ailment" was the thorn in the flesh that Paul refers to in his letter to the Corinthian believers: "So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud" (2 Corinthians 12:7 NLT). Whatever it was, his condition proved to be a trial to the believers in Galatia, and yet, because of the good news he brought to them, they had gladly received him.

But now, because of the influence of false teachers, the believers in Galatia were eyeing Paul with suspicion and questioning the veracity of his teaching. He asked them, “Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (Galatians 4:7 ESV). Sometimes the truth of God is difficult to understand and even harder to accept. The concept of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is not something that makes sense to us. It goes against our human sensibilities. We have been trained to believe that nothing is free and anything of value must be earned. Even our much-beloved American work ethic stands in stark contrast to the grace offered by God through Jesus Christ. And the Galatians were falling prey to the words of the Judaizers who were attempting to convince them that their salvation was incomplete and insufficient. They needed more. They needed to do more. In fact, Paul accused these false teachers of making the believers in Galatia dependent upon them. Paul was preaching the freedom found in grace, while his enemies were trying to imprison believers back under the law.

Paul preached grace. And his message of grace was not just tied to salvation. For Paul, grace was an essential ingredient to the Christian life, from beginning to end. Peter felt the same way. “I am warning you ahead of time, dear friends. Be on guard so that you will not be carried away by the errors of these wicked people and lose your own secure footing. Rather, you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:17-18 NLT). The danger we all face as believers is thinking that we must somehow transform ourselves into the likeness of Christ through self-effort and hard work. And while we do have a responsibility to pursue Christlikeness, we must always remember that it is by God’s grace and through His power that we are transformed. We can no more sanctify ourselves than we could have saved ourselves. Sanctification, like salvation, is a grace gift, provided to us by God and made possible through His indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul knew that only God could “form” or transform the Galatians into the likeness of Christ. The word Paul used literally meant, “until a mind and life in complete harmony with the mind and life of Christ shall have been formed in you” (“G3445 – *morphoō* – Strong’s Greek Lexicon (KJV).” Blue Letter Bible).

Only God can turn sinners into saints, enemies into sons and daughters, captives into free men, the dead into the living, and the condemned into co-heirs with Jesus Christ. Paul wanted his readers to understand just how much he loved them and how desperately he longed for them to remain in God’s grace. Their growth in holiness was to be the work of God, not the result of human effort. Our role as believers is to remain completely dependent upon the grace of God. Any effort we put into our spiritual formation is to be according to His power, not ours. As soon as we begin to think that our spiritual growth is somehow up to us, we step out of the light of His grace and back into the darkness of legalism. We must always recognize that our transformation into the likeness of Christ is God’s work, not ours. Our sole responsibility is that of dependence that leads to willful obedience. Our desire, like that of Paul, should be to see Christ formed in us. But that requires living in the freedom of God’s grace and fully reliant upon His power.

Children of the Promise

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

*“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than those of the one who has a husband.”*

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. – Galatians 4:21-31 ESV

One of the dangers of biblical interpretation is that of taking what was meant to be literal and turning it into an allegory. This is most often done with difficult passages. Because the Bible is made up of a variety of literary styles, such as history and poetry, and some passages are allegorical in nature, it can be tempting to take what God intended to be literal and force upon it an allegorical meaning. Another thing that can make reading and interpreting the Bible difficult is that there are some passages that have both literal and allegorical messages within them. Paul provides us with a case in point. In his defense of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, Paul will use the historical account of the births of Ishmael and Isaac to explain the true nature of the law and man’s relationship to it.

Paul somewhat sarcastically asked his readers, who seemed to be set on living according to the law, why they refused to listen to what the law said. He then tells the story of the birth of Abraham’s two sons, found in the book of Genesis, located in the “law” section of the Old Testament. When a Jew referred to “the book of the law,” he was referring to not only the Mosaic law itself, but to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible as we know it today. The Genesis account tells of the birth of Ishmael to Abraham through his wife’s handmaiden, Hagar. This had been the result of Sarah’s attempt to help God fulfill His promise to give Abraham a son. The only problem was that it was not according to God’s plan. Sarah had seen her barrenness as a problem too big for God, so she had intervened and encouraged Abraham to have a child with Hagar. But Paul pointed out that Ishmael, “the son of the slave was born according to the flesh” (Galatians 4:23 ESV). Paul’s emphasis was that Ishmael’s birth was of the

flesh or natural. And as the son of a slave, his relationship to Abraham would be completely different than that of Isaac. God had told Abraham that Ishmael would not be an acceptable substitute or stand-in as his heir. God had promised to give Abraham an heir through Sarah, despite her barrenness, and He did. God supernaturally intervened and made it possible for Sarah to conceive and bear Abraham a son. And Isaac's birth was the direct fulfillment of God's long-standing promise to Abraham.

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. – Genesis 12:1-2 ESV

As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her. – Genesis 17:15-16 ESV

And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him." – Genesis 17:18-19 ESV

Ishmael, the son of the slave woman, was not to be Abraham's heir. That right and responsibility would go to Isaac, the son of the promise. It is at this point that Paul reveals the allegorical or figurative message found in this literal, historical recounting of the births of Ishmael and Isaac. "Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants" (Galatians 4:24 ESV). What Paul is really providing us with is an analogy or illustration of what these historical events represent or foreshadow. Ishmael represented the covenant of the law given at Mount Sinai. Because Ishmael was born "according to the flesh" or through Sarah's and Abraham's self-reliance, he was disqualified from becoming the fulfillment of God's promise. The law, though given by God, was completely dependent upon man's ability to live up to it. It was based on self-reliance. The law was never intended by God to bring about man's justification or right standing before Him. It simply revealed and exposed the depths of man's sinfulness. The law enslaved men under sin. It condemned them for their sin but could do nothing to relieve them from its control over their lives. That is, until Christ came. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5 ESV). At one point, Jesus had told the Pharisees, the experts in the Mosaic law, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:34-36 ESV).

Paul was attempting to contrast Judaism with Christianity and compare life under the law with the life according to faith. Paul wanted his readers to know that they were children according to the promise. They had been freed from the onerous task of attempting to keep the law in an ill-fated effort to earn a right-standing before God. Jesus Christ had died to set them free and

justify them before God according to His works, not theirs. So why would they ever want to go back to trying to keep the law? Ishmael would share in the inheritance promised by God to Abraham's heir. And those who attempt to live by keeping the law through dependence upon their own self-effort, will not inherit eternal life, promised by God to all those who placed their faith in His Son. The temptation toward legalism and self-reliance is alive and well today. The pressure to somehow earn favor with God through our own self-effort exists for all believers. But Paul would have us remember that we are called to live our lives by faith. We are to trust in God and His indwelling Holy Spirit, not our weak and frail flesh. We must learn to say as Paul did earlier in this same letter: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20 NLT).

