

Gospel: Door to salvation and power to live a holy life

Galatians 3:23-29

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If we are not careful we read the Bible and seek to understand it from the perspective of our cultural background and our time in history. That will often result in incorrect or at least an incomplete understanding and application of scripture. One way we guard against these types of errors is by asking this key question: "What did this mean to the original hearers?" To answer this question we must then take into consideration the context, the culture, the situation and much more. As we begin to understand what it meant to the original hearers we can better deduce the true meaning of the passage. Only then are we prepared to apply the timeless truths of the scripture to our lives here in Spain in year 2017.

The book of Galatians was written around 50 AD. By this time there were already more Gentile believers than Jewish. In the midst of this movement of God there was still one crucial question that had not been answered. Do Gentiles have to become Jews before they are able to follow Christ? To answer the controversial question was the purpose of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 3:23-29 presents Paul's reasoning in these words:

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is

neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

The phrase “*before faith came*” is referring to the v. 22 reference of “*faith in Jesus Christ.*” It is parallel to the “*until Christ came*” in verse 24. It has two similar meanings. In a historical sense Paul is writing of before Jesus came to die and be raised from the dead to make our salvation available. In a practical sense you could say, “before faith came (into our lives) we were held captive under the law” (both Mosaic and the law written on our hearts, Romans 2).

Without Christ we are each “held captive by the law” because of our sin. This phrase had two meanings that can be seen in the context of a city under attack, being guarded by its soldiers. First it was meant to protect the residents from external attackers. Secondly it held all residents inside the walls with no opportunity to leave. This was the role of the law in our lives. Our conscience accuses us (Romans 2). We are afraid of judgment (Romans 6:23). We are slaves to sin (Romans 6:20). We are spiritually dead and cornered by sin. It was meant to be a blessing that would protect us, but because of our sin it has become a curse that condemns us.

It is similar to our feelings when we see a policeman. If we are law-abiding citizens, we are glad to see them because they provide safety and security. If we are guilty of a crime, we fear being caught and being punished. The law is similar. Since we all are naturally sinful, the law brings fear to our hearts and condemnation through our conscience. The law reveals the wickedness of our sin. The law shows us that our sin is against a holy God. The law shows us that the penalty of sin is death. The law exposes the fact that we cannot save ourselves. Being captive to the law seems like a curse, but in reality it is the tool of God that drives us towards Christ, our Savior. Otherwise we would not know of our desperate need until we are standing before God in judgment. Then it would be too late.

Without the law we cannot see the gravity or depravity of our sin. As a blind man cannot tell the difference in quality between a Goya painting and a 5 year old girl’s birthday card to her father. As a deaf person cannot tell the difference between Handel’s Messiah and the grating sound of fingernails on a chalkboard. Neither can we, who are dead in our sin, appreciate the hopelessness of our depravity, unless the law reveals it to us and the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and brings us to repentance.

“*The law was our guardian.*” The law provided God’s proposed direction and restraint. It prescribed how a mature son should behave and the discipline that would follow disobedience, yet more often than not, Israel behaved more like a rebellious teenager. The law exposed Israel’s sin and put them under various forms of discipline until the promise was fulfilled through Christ.

In the Greek household this guardian or custodian had care of the son from childhood until his entrance into manhood. At times this guardian was a slave that was owned by the family. He might have been very well educated, like a tutor for the son of a wealthy family. The guardian was a protector, a counselor and an advisor. He governed the child with external restraints, with the goal of raising the child to the point that external restraints would no longer be necessary for wise living. The son often would grow impatient as he sat under the control of the guardian. He only dreamed of the day when he

could bear the family name, control the family's riches, and be free from the guardian's control, correction and discipline. Spiritually speaking the role of "the guardian" was to drive us to Christ where we would be justified, made right with God and receive the inheritance as sons.

²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

"Now that faith has come," does not mean that no one in Israel had had faith before. We find many examples of faith in the Old Testament. We can say more clearly, "now that the object of our faith has come." The mystery has now been revealed. The promised offspring is no longer a mystery. We now know the "rest of the story." The types and symbols of the Old Testament have now been made clear. The lamb that was sacrificed for atonement now finds its true expression in Jesus Christ, the "Lamb of God." The veil in the Temple that kept the people out of the presence of God was torn from top to bottom as Christ died. Through Christ, our sin that separated us from God has now been forgiven. We are all invited to come before the throne of God with confidence and find grace and mercy in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

Because of this new life in Christ we are no longer under the law as our guardian. We have now been freed from discipline and condemnation. Our heart no longer accuses us. We are counted righteous in the eyes of God. We are now recognized as sons and have received our full inheritance that is found in Christ in us (Ephesians 1). Some may ask why Paul did not say "sons and daughters of God", but we must once again look back to the culture of Paul's day. The daughters were not held in high regard. They would receive very little of the inheritance compared to a son. If Paul had said daughters of God, the symbolism would have been very weak, undesirable and incorrect. God has lavished His grace and inheritance upon us as a father would have given to a son in their day. For those women that were listening, the thought of receiving an inheritance from God as a son must have been a great realization. Once again this would be taken hold of through faith, not by any merit of their own.

²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There are three types of baptism that we see in the New Testament. There was the baptism of John the Baptist. This was a baptism of repentance where Jews were turning from their sin and returning to God in preparation for the Messiah's coming. Secondly, there was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist spoke of how Jesus would come and baptize men with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11). This is the baptism that takes place at salvation. At salvation we are immersed in the Spirit. The Spirit indwells us, fills us, empowers us and makes us a part of the spiritual body of Christ. The third type of baptism is believer's baptism that takes place by immersion in water. It is a physical, public proclamation of the baptism of the Holy Spirit that has already taken place. It is a physical symbol of the old self dying and the new self be raised to walk in newness of life. It is an external proclamation of an internal commitment that has already taken place in one's heart.

Verse 27 is referring to the baptism of the Holy Spirit that happens at conversion. We are immersed in, filled with, overcome by Christ and have “put on Christ.”

The Romans had a special ceremony for the son who was now crossing over to manhood. It was called “*toga virilis*.” The young man was robed with a *toga virilis*, which signified that he was now a mature son, ready to take on the responsibility of full citizenship with all the rights and responsibilities that came with it. He was no longer under the watch care of a guardian. The belief was that external restraint used with a child was no longer necessary, because the son had now matured to the point that he was ready to live rightly without the needed guidance of another.

Putting on Christ, in some ways, was similar. In Christ, one’s sinful nature has been removed. We no longer are driven along by guilt and fear. We now have been forgiven and granted a new heart. We now are compelled by love for God and a love for our neighbor. We wear the righteousness of Christ. As we put on Christ we are empowered to live rightly as a son who has come of age.

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Once again we must return to the Galatian culture to start to understand how they must have appreciated this verse. In the traditional Jewish morning prayer, the Jewish man thanked God that “Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman.” Paul completely broke with that Jewish perspective. The old distinctions were gone; all were one in Christ. With the teaching of the Jewish false teachers, the Gentiles were second-class citizens in the church. Slaves were used to thinking too lowly of themselves. The slave masters likely thought too highly of themselves. The women were seen as property in the culture of their day. Some of the men were worried about the supposed need for circumcision.

But praise God that Paul makes it very clear that being right with God does not depend on who we are and what we have done. It is totally based on who Christ is and what He has done. In that light we are all equal in our sin and in the grace that we have received through faith. When talking of salvation there is “*neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

Paul is not saying that gender is not important or that gender no longer exists. We can see in scripture that that is not the case. Husbands and wives both receive biblical instructions of how to relate to each other in scripture. Older women are commanded to teach younger women. Men are to teach younger men. There is still a role of gender in the body of Christ and in the family, but when it comes to salvation we all receive the same inheritance in Christ and are loved unconditionally, based solely on the merit of Christ. That must have been so encouraging to those who had been traditionally “held down” in society. It must also have worked humility in the hearts of those who had thought too highly of themselves.

In our international church these verses are important for us to grasp. Our goal is not to be tolerant with those in the church who are not like us. Christ asks for more. We are to love and care for our cross-cultural brothers and sisters in Christ. They are now our family. Think for a moment. After we have been

in heaven together for a trillion years, eternity will just be beginning. Do you really think that we will still be fixated on the fact that we were from Nigeria, China, Spain or the Philippines? Scripture likens this lifetime to a mist or a vapor. It is here and then it is gone. The truest sense of brothers and sisters that we will have are not those who look like us or who speak our language. Our true brothers and sisters are those who are in Christ. Together we share the inheritance of Christ, the love of the Father and the same eternal home. We are family.

29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

These words would have been greatly offensive to the Jews. In their minds the Jews were Abraham's offspring. They were the chosen people. They were favored by God because of who they were (Abraham's biological descendants) and what they had done (obeying all the Jewish rules and rituals). Paul once again proclaims to them that the people who are in Christ through faith are the true offspring of Abraham and thus the true children of God. As Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness, so those who believe in Christ will be counted as righteous. Salvation is not based on who we are and what we have done. It is based on who Christ is and what He has done.

We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are loved unconditionally by our heavenly Father.

Love one another as He has loved us . . . forever.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)