

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS
NO OTHER GOSPEL:
FREEDOM IN CHRIST

LESSON 8: "Relating to God: Let's Compare" **Date:** November 2/9, 2014

TEXT: Galatians 3:23-4:7

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: When a person is wrestling with a difficult decision, it is a common practice to compare the options using a "pros and cons" list. The individual considers all the benefits and problems of one option and compares it with the benefits and problems of the other.

In Galatians 3:23-4:7, Paul similarly compares two different ways of relating to God, and he does so by considering their "pros and cons." Paul is evaluating faith in Christ and adherence to the Law, as competing means of relating to God. As he compares and contrasts these different methods, it becomes clear that while both have "pros," the absence of "cons" in the way of faith in Christ makes it the excellent choice. Yes, **relating to God through faith is better than relating to God through the Law.**

In essence, Paul adds one more argument to his repertoire as he defends salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

- the experience of the Galatians (3:1-5)
- the example of Abraham (3:6-9)
- the expiation of Jesus Christ (3:10-14)
- the establishment of the Covenant (3:15-18)
- the essence of the Law (3:19-22)
- the excellence of faith (3:23-4:7)

Paul proves the excellence of faith by comparing it with the Law in two areas.

COMPARING THEIR MINISTRY (3:23-29)

Paul's first comparison is found in Galatians 3:23-29 and is evident from the phrases "now before faith came" (v. 23) and "but now that faith has come" (v. 25). This comparison deals with the ministry of faith and the Law. In other words, Paul evaluates how each actually relates us to God.


1. The ministry of the Law (vv. 23-24) — its function:

Paul reiterates and expands upon what he already stated in verse 22 regarding the two-fold function of the Law.

a. Guard, imprisoning us under sin (v. 23)

First, Paul restates that the Law served as a guard, imprisoning us under sin—"we were held captive under the Law, imprisoned." The word "held captive" literally means "to guard, detain, or hold in custody." It was used in 2 Corinthians 11:32 to refer to "the governor under King Aretas [who] was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize" Paul (cf. Acts 9:24, different but similar word). "When applied to a city, it was used both of keeping the enemy out and of keeping the inhabitants in, lest they should flee or desert."¹ The word "imprisoned" is the same as in verse 22 and literally means "to enclose or hem in" (Luke 5:6). Here it carries the idea of "confining or keeping under restraint."

Clearly, then, when we were attempting to relate to God on the basis of the Law, we were miserable prisoners, awaiting our death sentence (Romans 6:23; 8:1).

 **Discussion:** The Gentiles didn't possess the Law of Moses like the Jews (cf. Romans 3:2; 9:4-5), but were nonetheless imprisoned by it. Read Romans 2:14-16 and explain how? *There is a universal moral sentiment within every person, which is why Gentiles often "by nature do what the Law requires." The character and will of God reflected in the Law is "written on their heart" and then evidenced in their conscience. Therefore, they, too, are bound by God's moral law and will be judged by it.*


 **Discussion:** Compare this "guard" with the "guard" of Philippians 4:7 and 1 Peter 1:5 (same word). Which one is better? Why? *Christians "are being guarded" by God's power "through faith" (1 Peter 1:5). The Law was a tough jailer, bringing condemnation; faith similarly guards us, but for our protection and ultimate salvation. Until then, God's peace can "guard" believers in an even much more subjective and experiential way, protecting their hearts and minds from anxiety.*

Illustration: Athletes who sustain significant injuries mid-season will often opt for a temporary fix in order to continue to play. For example, a football player who wrenches his knee may simply take some cortisone shots and other treatment in order to “freeze” the muscles and numb the pain. While the athlete may then continue to play with little immediate impact, the temporary treatment simply covers the damage, and it often worsens. Many football players have dealt with lifelong physical issues due to silencing the pain and covering it up, instead of treating it. “By rejecting pain, the body’s warning system, [they pay] serious consequences. The purpose of pain is to warn and protect. When that warning is ignored or covered up, the results are always bad. So it is with guilt. It is the divine warning system telling man he is destroying his soul. If ignored, the results are eternally bad.”²

Application: That illustration leads us well into our next point. The Law was given in order to capture and confine us, but that captivity under the Law doesn’t have to be final, leading to eternal condemnation. Instead, it should make us look for freedom from somewhere outside our prison cell! So many people are trusting their jailor (the Law) to save them, but that was never its purpose. Instead, its conviction and judgment should make us look for an advocate and rescuer elsewhere! That leads us to the Law’s second ministry.

b. Guardian, directing us toward Christ (v. 24)

Verse 23 already hinted at this, stating that the Law was meant to guard people only “until the coming faith would be revealed.” We’ll talk more about that phrase in a bit, but for now we should observe that the Law was always an arrow and not a period. The Law was always pointing and driving us towards something else—faith in Christ! That becomes even clearer in verse 24.

According to verse 24, “the Law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.” BDAG explains the position of the guardian (Gk. paidagogos):

[This was] originally “boy-leader”, the man, usually a slave (Plut., Mor. 4ab), whose duty it was to conduct a boy or

*youth (Plut., Mor. 439f) to and from school and to superintend his conduct generally; he was not a “teacher” (despite the present meaning of the derivative “pedagogue”...). When the young man became of age, the paidagogos was no longer needed.*³

Stott adds some more color to the role of this guardian:

*He was often harsh to the point of cruelty, and is usually depicted in ancient drawings with a rod or cane in his hand. J. B. Phillips thinks that the modern equivalent is “a strict governess”. Paul uses the word again in 1 Corinthians 4:15, saying “You may have ten thousand tutors in Christ, but you have only one father” (neb). In other words, “there are plenty of people to discipline you, but I am the only one to love you.” Later in the same chapter he asks: “Am I to come to you with a rod in my hand (i.e. like a paidagōgos), or in love and a gentle spirit (i.e. like a father)?” (1 Cor. 4:21, neb).*⁴

One other point needs to be stressed about this guardian. He served only in a temporary capacity.

*The role of the paidagōgos was never permanent, and it was a great day of deliverance when a boy finally gained freedom from his paidagōgos. His purpose was to take care of the child only until he grew into adulthood. At that time the relationship was changed. Though the two of them might remain close and friendly, the paidagogos, having completed his assignment, had no more authority or control over the child, now a young man, and the young man had no more responsibility to be directly under the paidagōgos.*⁵



The aptness of this term to describe the Law is now clear. How so?

First, Paul “is saying that the Jews were not born through the Law, but rather were brought up by the Law. The slave was not the child’s father; he was the child’s guardian and disciplinarian. So, the Law did not give life to Israel; it regulated life. The Judaizers taught that the Law was necessary for life and righteousness, and Paul’s argument shows their error.”⁶

Second, there was nothing pleasant about the ministry of the guardian, but it served a necessary purpose. Likewise, “the sole purpose of the Law, God’s divinely appointed *paidagōgos*, was to lead men to Christ, that they might be justified. After a person comes to Him, there is no longer need for the external ceremonies and rituals to act as guides and disciplinarians, because the new inner principles operate through the indwelling Christ.”⁷

Third, the ministry of the guardian was only a temporary one. Similarly, Paul has been clear that the ministry of the Law was only an interim one (cf. “until” in vv. 19, 23, 24 and 4:2; “now...no longer” in v. 25; “when the appropriate time had come” in 4:4).

Fourth, the ultimate goal of the guardian was the maturity of the children. Likewise, the Law’s intent was to direct us to maturity in the way we relate to God. In this case, that maturity is evidenced in being “justified by faith,” not in attempting to earn justification through adherence to the Law.

Finally, the guardian worked in cooperation with the father, not independently of him. He worked to accomplish the father’s will and not his own, and he would eventually be overshadowed by the children’s freedom in their personal relationship with their father. Likewise, “before Christ came, the law of external ritual and ceremony, especially the sacrificial system, pictured the once-for-all, perfect, and effective sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world. When the perfect Christ comes into the believer’s heart, those imperfect pictures of Him have no more purpose or significance.”⁸

Application: Wiersbe summarizes well the ministry of the Law: “The Law cannot change the promise, and the Law is not greater than the promise. But the Law is not contrary to the promise: they work together to bring sinners to the Saviour.”⁹ Indeed, the Law served a specific, divinely-ordained ministry—it was meant to guard people in a prison of their own sinful making, and it was intended to superintend them to faith in Jesus Christ. Yet many today, like the Jews, are not looking where the Law is pointing. Instead, “despite the fact that they could not keep the law, most Jews rejected the way of faith [cf. John 1:11-12]. They began to play mental games with themselves, devising traditions they *were* able to keep in order to convince

themselves they could attain righteousness before God.”¹⁰ Friend, the ministry of the Law is incomplete and inferior to the ministry of faith. Don’t stay captured and dominated by the Law; look in faith to Christ and know His freedom and fullness.

2. ***The ministry of faith (vv. 25-29) — its offer:***

We now turn our attention to verses 25-29 where the ministry of faith is more clearly elucidated. Its primacy and permanence have already been suggested by two comparative statements: “before faith...now that faith has come” (vv. 23a, 25a) and “under the Law...until the coming faith would be revealed...until Christ” (v. 23, 24). These phrases remind us that the intentional but inferior ministry of the Law was operating for us until something else took over. That “something else” is described as the “coming” (3x. in vv. 23, 25—Gk. *erchomai* 2x and *mello*) of (lit.) or “revealing” (Gk. *apokalupto* v. 23) of “the faith” or the “coming” of Christ (Gk. *ginomai*). This could be interpreted both historically and personally. Historically, the Law served its purpose for 1,500 years until Christ came and the object of faith’s promise arrived. Personally, the testimony of every believer is that they were under the condemning ministry of the Law until they individually trusted in Christ when he was “revealed” in their heart (cf. 1:16).

Both interpretations are accurate, and Paul writes in verse 25-26, “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” Clearly, then, when compared with the way of the Law, the ministry of faith is better! Let’s consider three spiritual realities that faith offers to us in its excellent ministry.

a. ***Adoption (vv. 25-26)***

In the verses we just read, Paul reiterated that “faith” is the maturity that the guardianship of the Law was directing us toward. And now that such maturity has been realized, we are “no longer under a guardian” but are now “sons of God.” In other words, the temporal guardianship of the Law is replaced with true sonship “through faith.” The Law couldn’t make us children, even of Abraham (v. 7); it could only point us to faith in Christ, who alone could fulfill such a superior ministry by making us “sons of God” (John 1:12)!

b. Union (vv. 27-28)

The Law could never bring a sinner into a right relationship with God. Instead, vividly pictured by a fence around the tabernacle and a massively thick veil barring entrance into the Holy of Holies (Exodus 26:31-33), it only exacerbated our separation from God (cf. Genesis 3:21-24; Isaiah 59:2). In contrast, the atoning death of Christ caused the veil to be rent in two, picturing His ability alone to “bring us [back] to God” (1 Peter 3:18). When that reconciliation is applied to an individual believer’s heart, it is called “the baptism of the Spirit,” referenced by Paul here, explained in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, and illustrated in water baptism. This happens to “all” believers and joins us together in harmony with God.

This union with God is also described in verse 27 as having “put on Christ” (cf. Galatians 2:20). MacArthur notes:

That is a graphic way to describe how Christ’s life, presence, and righteous nature envelop the believer. ... The simplest definition of a Christian is a person who is clothed...with Christ. Followers of Confucius, Buddha, or Mohammed are never said to be clothed with those men whose names they carry and whose teachings they follow. But there is no such thing as a Christian who is not clothed...with Christ. Following Christ’s teachings is important, but that cannot save a person or keep him saved. It is only being clothed...with Christ that provides and preserves salvation.¹¹

A result of this union with God is union with other believers (v. 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” (cf. Romans 10:12). In the body of Christ, there are no spiritual differences, but only wonderful equality regarding spiritual standing, value, privilege, and worthiness. This verse makes it clear that race, economic or social status, and gender have no bearing on the equal status of all Christians.



Discussion: What are the obvious implications of this union? *We should strive for unity (Ephesians 4:1-7; James 2:1-13).*

c. Participation (v. 29)

Finally, Paul concludes in verse 29, “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” Since we are united to Christ (v. 27) to whom the promise was ultimately made (cf. vv. 14-18), we prove to be “Abraham’s [spiritual] offspring” by faith (cf. vv. 6-7) and joint “heirs” with Christ (cf. vv. 8-9, 14, 18; cf. Romans 8:17).

This is not a reference to the promises given to Abraham regarding the land (Gen. 12:1; 13:14–15; 17:8), but refers to the spiritual blessings that come to all who, being justified by faith just as Abraham was (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3-11), will inherit the spiritual promises given to Abraham [detailed in the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31]. Not all the physical seed of Abraham will receive the promises of salvation (Rom. 9:6-11), but many who are not physical seed of Abraham will receive them by coming to God by faith as he did, thereby becoming his spiritual offspring.¹²

Application: What an excellent ministry is discovered in Christ-centered faith! This is indeed wonderfully “good news” for a church full of Gentiles (cf. Ephesians 2:11-19). Not being privileged as receivers of God’s Law, we were nonetheless under its same condemnation, but we have become full receivers of God’s promise of justification by grace alone through faith alone. Adoption in Christ, union with God and each other, and participation in a spiritual inheritance—these blessings and more are ours because of the excellence of faith’s ministry.

Application: John 1:16-17 is an interesting passage that again shows the inferiority of the ministry of the Law to the ministry of faith in Christ. That passage reads, “For from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Verse 17 seems to explain what “grace upon grace” in verse 16 means. When “the Law was given through Moses,” it was a manifestation of God’s grace, for it was meant to condemn us in sin so that we would run to Christ. And then, when Christ came, the “fullness” of “grace and truth” was revealed (cf. John 1:14). This was “grace upon grace,” an excellent ministry indeed!

Stott writes, “We cannot come to Christ to be justified until we have first been to Moses to be condemned. But once we have gone to Moses, and acknowledged our sin, guilt and condemnation, we must not stay there. We must let Moses send us to Christ.”¹³

Transition: Paul’s purpose in this passage is simple—he is seeking to demonstrate that relating to God through faith is better than relating to God through the Law. To prove the excellence of faith, he compares and contrasts it with the Law. He first compared their ministry and discovered that the freedom afforded by faith is far superior to the bondage (albeit a purposeful bondage) of the Law. Paul’s second point of comparison has to do with their identity.

COMPARING THEIR IDENTITY (4:1-7)

Illustration: In virtually every developed country and every historical era, people have found a sense of worth and belonging—their identity—in their social status. This identity is often used as a determination of acceptance or exclusion and has frequently led to severe discrimination (e.g., affects 250 million people worldwide). Perhaps the clearest example of such social stratification is in the caste system of India.¹⁴ In that Hindu culture, society is divided into four different ranks or varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. A fifth group is sometimes added, the Dalits or “untouchables.” Each community has its own identity with its historical heritage, specific occupations, economic standing, and future potential, and there has traditionally been little overlap between each class. An individual’s caste totally defines him.

In Galatians 4:1-7, faith and the Law are seen to be almost two different classes, two different ranks—they offer unique spiritual identities that comprehensively define their members. No one can belong to both groups at the same time, and one’s identity and destiny will be fully governed by his or her group. When the status or identity of these groups is compared, it is unmistakably clear that the way of faith is better.

The actual illustration that Paul uses in this passage is the one he introduced in the previous paragraph (cf. vv. 24-26, 29)—a minor-aged child under a guardian (vv. 1-3) versus a mature child with full rights (vv. 4-7). Both illustrations serve to show that each way of relating to God has a distinctive identity.

1. **The identity of the Law (vv. 1-3) — slaves**

The identity of the Law is described in verses 1-3 — “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.”

a. **Paul’s illustration (vv. 1-2)**

As we mentioned, Paul is referring back here to his previous illustration of the “guardian” (Gk. *paidagogos*) in 3:24-26. The guardian was responsible for the discipline and guidance of the young children until they became “of age” and were “no longer under a guardian” (3:25). That development and resulting change in status is highlighted by Paul’s use of two different Greek words for “child.” The word he uses in 4:1 is *nepios*, which denotes a young child and is often translated “infant.” The young and immature *nepios* was under the control of “guardians and managers” (Gk. *epitropos* and *oikonomos*, v. 2) until the day he official entered manhood (at “the date set by his father, v. 2, usually between ages 14 and 17).¹⁵ At that point, while still a child in the sense of being the son of his parents, he was no longer an adolescent *nepios*, but a mature and favored *huios* instead (the Gk. word used in 3:7, 26; 4x in 4:5-7). His status had changed.

Listen to how one historian describes this Roman tradition.

A boy's coming-of-age ceremony began when the boy laid his bulla [a piece of jewelry hung around the child's neck by the father on the day of his birth] and bordered toga before the lares of the house [statues of guardian deities] in the early morning. A sacrifice was offered. ... The boy then dressed himself in a white tunic, adjusted by his father. ... Over this was draped the toga virilis (toga of the grown man), also called the toga libera. ... When the boy was ready, the procession to the Forum began. The father had gathered his slaves, freedmen, clients, relatives and friends, using all his influence to make his son's escort numerous and imposing. Here the boy's name was added to the list of

*citizens, and formal congratulations were extended. Then the family climbed up to the temple of Liber on the Capitoline Hill, where an offering was made to the god. Finally they all returned to the house, where the day ended with a dinner party given by the father in honour of the new Roman citizen.*¹⁶

Clearly, then, the day of manhood marked a stark change in status, rank, and identity. When the boy was a *nepios*, verse 1 observes that he was virtually “no different from a slave.” He may have been the firstborn son and “heir” to his father’s entire estate (i.e., “the owner of everything,” v. 1), but as long as he was an immature child (i.e., a *nepios*), he was treated in essence as “a slave” (v. 1), enjoying no personal freedom and not being allowed to make his own decisions (v. 2).¹⁷ It wasn’t until the day of inauguration into manhood, that the child became officially recognized as the “heir” (v. 7) with full rights (v. 5). So, on a very real and practical level, a young boy’s (i.e., a *nepios*) status was closer to that of a poor slave than a privileged son.

b. Paul’s application (v. 3)

In verse 3, Paul begins to apply that illustration (i.e., “in the same way...also”) to the way in which people relate to God. Prior to the maturity of faith in Christ (i.e., “when we were [spiritual] children” or *nepios*, v. 3, and before we were recognized as spiritual “heirs,” 3:29), we are also slaves, “enslaved to the elementary principles of the world” (cf. v. 7). Before the adulthood of faith, under the guardianship of the Law, that is a person’s identity—slavery.

In New Testament times a slave (Gk. *doulos*) was in total bondage. One lexicon defines a *doulos* as “one who is in a permanent relation of servitude to another, his will being altogether consumed in the will of the other.”¹⁸ Another offers this description: “pertaining to a state of being completely controlled by someone or something.”¹⁹

Verse 3 says that unbelievers are enslaved to “the elementary principles of the world” (cf. v. 9). Homer Kent explains the meaning of the word underlying “elementary principles” (Gk. *stoicheia*): “Basically it denotes that which belongs to a series,

and was applied to such things as the syllables that make up a word, the elements that make up the cosmos, and the notes in a line of music.”²⁰ In this context (especially when compared to the usage of this same word in Colossians 2:8, 20), these “elementary principles” “refer to the elementary stages of religious experience, whether of Jews under the Law [the issue immediately at hand, cf. v. 5] or Gentiles in bondage to heathen religions.”²¹ MacArthur explains:

*The elemental things of all human religion, whether Jewish or Gentile, ancient or modern, inevitably involve the idea of achieving divine acceptance by one’s own efforts. And they are elemental in that they are only human, never rising beyond the mundane to the divine.*²²

In our own religious endeavors, which all amount to some expression of self-effort, we discover only bondage to that which is elementary when it comes to the matter of relating to God. Just as a young Roman boy was missing out on the joyful intimacy of a personal relationship with the father because of his subjection to the guardian, so obedience to the Law as a means of being reconciled to and justified by God is a juvenile approach that deprives us from the joy of an unconditional relationship of love and grace. To remain “under” (3x in vv. 2, 3, 5) the tyranny of self-effort is to be undeniably identified as a slave, not a true son. But, Paul shows us “a more excellent way.”

Illustration:

John Wesley was an honor graduate of Oxford University, an ordained clergyman in the Church of England and orthodox in theology. He was active in practical good works, regularly visiting the inmates of prisons and workhouses in London and helping distribute food and clothing to slum children and orphans. He studied the Bible diligently and attended numerous Sunday services as well as various other services during the week. He generously gave offerings to the church and alms to the poor. He prayed and fasted and lived an exemplary moral life. He even spent several years as a missionary to American Indians in what was then the British colony of Georgia. Yet upon returning to England he confessed in his journal, “I who went to America to convert others was never myself converted to God.”

Later reflecting on his preconversion condition, he said. “I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son.”

Wesley tirelessly did everything he could to live a life acceptable to God, yet he knew something vital was missing. It was not until he went “very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street” one evening that he discovered and claimed true Christian life. “I felt my heart strangely warmed,” he wrote. “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” Things were no longer elemental for Wesley. He had entered “the heavenlies.”²³

Application: Let Paul’s forthcoming question in verse 9 provoke our own self-evaluation in this matter — “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?”

2. **The identity of faith (vv. 4-7) — sons**

The “but” heading verse 4 clearly marks a comparison and contrast with the identity of the Law.²⁴ Whereas one’s status as a Law-observer was explained in verses 1-3, one’s identity as a believer is expounded in verse 4-7. And this identity, too, can be summarized quite simply—true sonship. Paul adjusts his metaphor just a bit (to “adoption” in verse 5) as he continues writing in verse 4, “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.”

The response of faith alone to God’s gracious gospel-work drastically changes our rank from slavery to sonship. This new identity is provided for believers through the comprehensive work of the Godhead in our salvation.

a. **The work of the Father (v. 4) — initiation**

The gracious work of God the Father in our salvation is seen in verse 4, and can be outlined under three headings:

- ***In eternity past (“when the fullness of time had come”)*** — The text tells us that the Father’s work culminated “when the fullness of time had come.” God is not seen here as casually or arbitrarily working to save us. Instead, He has been at work behind the scenes since eternity past. Long ago, “before the foundation of the world,” the Father loved the Son (John 17:24), ordained the Son to be the agent of salvation (1 Peter 1:19-20), and elected some for eternal life (Ephesians 1:4; cf. Revelation 13:8; 17:8). Then, He continued to patiently, invisibly, and at times silently fulfill His plan, until “the fullness of time” when He culminated it with the sending of Christ Jesus. Likewise, even now God is patiently working, awaiting a date that He alone knows when He will again culminate His work with the sending of His Son (2 Peter 3:9).



Discussion: Many Bible scholars and historians have noted that this divinely-ordained “fullness of time” coincided with a time in Roman history called the *Pax Romana* (lit. “Roman peace” from c. 20 BC - AD 180), an era that uniquely contributed to the initial dissemination of the gospel and the spread of Christianity. What were some of the distinguishing marks of this historical era that certainly helped the birth and growth of the Christian gospel?²⁵ (1) *Political unity — This facilitated security and travel among other benefits (one government, one law, one language, one road system, one postal system).* (2) *Jewish patriotism — Since their return to their homeland after the captivity, the Jews had proclaimed the messianic hope throughout the synagogues of the Palestinian world, preparing the world for the One who would fulfill those ancient promises. Then, when the antagonism of the nationalistic Jews finally provoked the ire of the Roman authorities and the central Jewish religious culture was destroyed in AD 70, it allowed Christianity to distinguish itself, no longer as a sect of Judaism, but as a religion altogether superior to and in replacement of the Old Covenant.* (3) *Economic division — With no middle class, the vast majority of people in the Roman Empire were poor, and thus the new value system of Christ Himself and His teaching found welcome reception.* (4) *Urban growth — The Empire*

gave birth to large and thriving cities. In fact, “conditions were nearer to modern in AD 1 than in AD 1400. There is speculation that had Rome not fallen, an industrial revolution might have occurred. ... Such conditions were not to reappear in the Western world until the Reformation.” These large urban centers provided early Christian missionaries, like Paul, with an effective strategy for spreading the gospel (e.g., Paul spent nearly five of the ten years spanning his three missionary journeys in Ephesus and Corinth; Paul apparently led Epaphras to Christ in Ephesus, and he then returned to his home in the Lycus Valley and planted churches in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea). (5) Religious pluralism — The numerous religious options (i.e., the Greek and Roman pantheon, the cult of the Emperor, Greek and Roman philosophy, mystery religions, Gnosticism, Judaism, etc.) “made it possible for Christianity to vindicate itself against every major religious option.” (6) Roman morality — Roman culture was characterized by violence, divorce, sexual immorality including homosexuality, infanticide, leisure and entertainment, crime, etc.²⁶ It, therefore, was in stark contrast to the light of the gospel. In summary, “The world into which Christ came...was a world experiencing tremendous human achievement in the arts, sciences, and philosophy. Nevertheless, man’s greatest strides resulted in widespread depravity and misery. God gave man over to the natural bent of his depraved mind and then intervened in decisive fashion (Romans 1).”

- ***In time generally (“sent forth His Son”)*** — At the perfect time chosen by the Father, God “sent forth His Son.” While the Son came willingly, He was nonetheless sent at the initiation and bidding of the Father. Jesus Himself testified frequently throughout the gospels that He had come to do the will of His Father (cf. Hebrews 10:5-7). In His high priestly prayer in John 17, He acknowledges,

You have given [Me] authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom You have given [Me]. ... I glorified You on earth, having accomplished the work that You gave Me to do. ... I have manifested Your name

to the people whom You gave Me out of the world. Yours they were, and You gave them to Me ... Now they know that everything that You have given Me is from You. For I have given them the words that You gave Me ... Holy Father, keep them in Your name, which You have given Me ... While I was with them, I kept them in Your name, which You have given Me. ... I have given them Your word ... Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ... O righteous Father, even though the world does not know You, I know You, and these know that You have sent Me. I made known to them Your name, and I will continue to make it known.

The Father was the great architect of salvation, planning in eternity past and sending His Son at the right time for all humanity. “We have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14).

- ***In time personally (“until the date set,” v. 2)*** — Referring back to Paul’s illustration in verses 1-2, we note that the coming-of-age ceremony at which a boy (i.e., a *nepios*) became a man (cf. *huios*) occurred on “the date set by his father” (v. 2). While Paul seems to more immediately parallel that phrase with “the fullness of time” in verse 4, referring to the date when He sent Christ who is the object of a believer’s maturing faith, it can also apply personally to each individual believer. For each one of us, there was a particular “date set by [our] Father” when our status changed from enslaved minors to privileged sons and daughters by faith (vv. 5, 7). That specific event was the work of the Father (cf. 1:15-16; 4:6; cf. Acts 11:18; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:29).

b. The work of the Son (vv. 4-5) — execution

If God the Father planned salvation, God the Son performed it (i.e., His name was “Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins,” Matthew 1:21). In other words, in the plan of salvation, God the Father was the architect and initiator and God the Son was the agent and executor. In verses 4-5, we see Him executing God’s plan of salvation in four phases:

- ***Incarnation (“born of woman,” v. 4)*** — God sent His Son (cf. John 16:28) to be “born of woman.” As the “Son” of God, He was fully divine, equal in essence with the Father but subservient in role.²⁷ As the “Son of man” “born of woman,” He was fully human, conceived by a virgin and thus without sin (cf. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-25). Therefore, he was uniquely situated to be our Rescuer—“He had to be God to have the power of Savior, and He had to be man to have the position of Substitute.”²⁸

The fact that Christ Jesus was “born of woman” was in fulfillment of a promise made to humanity even long before the Abrahamic Covenant. Immediately after the Fall and during the rendering of the consequential curses, God promised, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her Offspring; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15). An “offspring” of the woman—the same “offspring” who would inherit and fulfill God’s promises to Abraham (cf. vv. 15-29)—would destroy the power of the Serpent and be bruised Himself in so doing (i.e., a blow to the head is lethal compared to injuring a heel). Hebrews 2:14-15 pictures the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, [Jesus] Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the Devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

The second Person of the Godhead became incarnate—lit. “in flesh,” one of us, a human—so that He could redeem us. Apart from such humble condescension (cf. Philippians 2:6-8), there would be no rescue for us.

- ***Perfection (“born under the Law,” v. 4)*** — Verse 4 further stresses that Christ was “born under the Law.” Every person is born “under the Law,” whether codified and written out as the Jews had it or simply internally witnessed to by one’s conscience (cf. Romans 2:12-16), and we are all obligated (i.e., “under”) to obey and be judged by the Law.

So Christ also was “under the Law,” but unlike the rest, He perfectly fulfilled it. At the start of His ministry, Jesus said to His cousin John at His baptism, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15; even previous to that, cf. Luke 2:21, 22, 27). Jesus stated in the Sermon on the Mount that He had come to “fulfill” the Law (Matthew 5:17). Later Scripture unequivocally states that He had been sinless in His obedience (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 3:18). So, when it came to the Law’s own standard of complete perfection, Jesus had vindicated Himself (cf. from Leviticus 18:5; Romans 2:13; 10:5; Galatians 3:12; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 2:10).

But as He executed divine salvation, Jesus couldn’t and didn’t stop there.

- ***Redemption (“to redeem those who were under the Law,” v. 5)*** — We have already seen that Christ was able to represent us as one of us (i.e., “born of woman”) and that He lived “under the Law” with unblemished obedience. Now, we discover that Jesus further bore the curse of the Law as we saw in Galatians 3:10, 13—that is, He paid the penalty that the Law demanded for those who failed to live in perfect conformity to it (i.e., those who were still very much “under the Law”). This was absolutely necessary in order for Jesus to “redeem” us (v. 5), which means to “set us free by paying a price.” The price of the Law was death, and Jesus paid that in full (which is the literal meaning of the Gk. word underlying “It is finished” in John 19:30).

So, Jesus fully disarmed the bondage of the Law by meeting its demands during His life and by paying its penalty with His death (cf. Romans 8:3-4). Therefore, this complete redemption that He offers by faith is not merely freedom from the curse of the Law (the emphasis of 3:13), but liberty from the entire Mosaic system. That system could only “imprison” with guilt, condemnation, and death. Christ has bought us out of that and set us free. The Law served its purpose, and its power has been disarmed for all those who have faith in Christ. Yes, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1). Indeed, the way of faith is excellent when compared to the way of the Law.

- **Adoption (“so that we might receive adoption as sons,” v. 5)** — The goal of Jesus’ salvific execution was “that we might receive adoption as sons” (v. 5). In the context, Paul’s main point here lies not in any process of adoption (although he has changed metaphors), but in the result of it—full rights and adult standing as mature children (*huios*²⁹ in v. 5, not *nepios*).³⁰ “All the enjoyments and privileges of a mature son in a family belong to those who have entered into the benefits of Christ’s redemptive work.”³¹ “They move not only from bondage into freedom, they also move into the great household of God where all are free men and all are also ‘heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ’ (Rom 8:17).”³²

c. The work of the Holy Spirit (v. 6) — actualization

For those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ and become “sons” (*huios*, not *nepios*), the Father “has sent the Spirit of His Son into [their] hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (v. 6; cf. Ephesians 1:5). Observe again the initiation of the Father here—He is the One who commissions the work of the Holy Spirit in this regard (cf. Romans 5:5). “God the Father sent the Son in order that believers might have the *position* of sons and He sent his Spirit so that they might have the *experience* of the same reality.”³³

According to this verse, all legitimate children of God receive His Spirit, not just some (as many today would teach). The reason for this indwelling of God’s Spirit is to authenticate and actualize our new familial relationship with God. Since we previously related to Him out of fear as slaves under the Law, His Spirit now assures us that He is our Father and we are His children (cf. Romans 8:15-17). And the Spirit does so, quite practically, by moving us to pray (cf. Romans 8:23-27).

The natural response of “the Spirit of His Son” Jesus within us is to pray humbly, dependently, and intimately to the Father, even as Jesus Himself did in Mark 14:36, when in a time of great turmoil He prayed, “Abba, Father.” “Abba” is the Greek transliteration of an Aramaic word and was a term of endearment, often used by small children when addressing their fathers. It is not altogether unlike our word “Daddy,” and it clearly stresses closeness and trust rather than formalism and fear.

Application: Two practical points are worth making here in light of this practical application of prayer in verse 6. First, let us never get over the wonder of the direct, intimate, familial relationship we have been given with God Himself! This reality has always been a distinguishing mark of Christianity compared to religions around the world, and that distinction continues today. Boice explains:

It is not always recognized how unusual the addressing of God as “Father” was in antiquity nor what an unforgettable impression Jesus’ habitual mode of praying made on his followers. ... In Jesus’ day (1) no one ever addressed God directly as “My Father,” because it would have been thought disrespectful; (2) Jesus always used this form of address in praying, much to the amazement of his disciples; and (3) Jesus authorized his disciples to use this form of address after him, and they did. ... God was never considered to be father of the individual. And in Christ’s day the distance between man and God was actually widening in popular thought rather than growing narrower. Jesus completely reversed this trend. This so impressed the disciples that, not only do all four Gospels record his use of this address, they also report that he did so in all his prayers (Matt 11:25; 26:39, 42; Mark 14:36; Luke 23:34; John 11:41; 12:27; 17:1, 5, 11, 21, 24, 25). The only exception is one that actually enforces the significance of the phrase, for it was the cry wrung from Christ’s lips at the moment in which he was made sin for mankind and in which the relationship to the Father that had been his was temporarily broken (Matt 27:46).³⁴

Second, let us not ignore, forget, or take for granted the Spirit’s primary means, according to this passage, of actualizing our intimate fellowship with God—prayer! Again, Boice comments:

How does the Christian experience what is his objectively? Paul suggests that this is primarily through the reality of God’s presence made known to him in prayer. Before, he was alienated from God, who indeed did not even hear him. Now, being made a member of his family, the Christian is permitted and even urged to cry, “Father.”³⁵

So, it may be, dear Christian, that the reason you still feel so far from God, the reason you still feel like and live like a slave, is that you have failed to cooperate with the indwelling Spirit's ministry of prayer, which is meant to help you experientially enjoy intimacy with God. If we would know true fellowship with God and be assured of our familial relationship with Him, then we must pray. It is in the practice of prayer that come to know God as our heavenly Father, and in that posture, the comfort, peace, security, freedom, and power of His Fatherhood become ours to enjoy.



Discussion: How does Romans 8:23-27 complement the practical point of this passage, that the Holy Spirit actualizes our intimate familial relationship with God through prayer?

Application: Verse 7 brings us back to the simple comparison that was started in verse 1. We can relate to God on the basis of faith or on the basis of obedience to the Law, but the status, rank, and identity of these two options could not be more different. The one way groups together its adherents in bondage as slaves; the other sets its followers free as sons. Yes, for all those who have faith in Christ Jesus, this is your excellent identity—"You are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God" (v. 7).

In light of the excellence of faith when compared to the Law, Paul's exasperation in verses 8-11 is clear and ought to be compelling for us, too.

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.

CONCLUSION

Faith and Law have been weighed in the balance. They have been carefully compared in these two paragraphs, and one is laden with cons. The Law serves a gracious purpose, but it can never rightly relate its observers to God; instead, it just convinces them of their helpless bondage to sin and points them to the solution in Christ. Only faith in Christ can unlock the chains of the Law, escape the prison of self-effort, and issue us boldly into the presence of God our Father. Indeed, relating to God through faith is better than relating to God through the Law.

ENDNOTES

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 96.

² John F. MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 94.

³ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 748.

⁴ Stott, 97.

⁵ MacArthur, 96.

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 703.

⁷ MacArthur, 96.

⁸ *Ibid.* Also, "The Law separated Israel from the Gentile nations (Eph. 2:12-18); it governed every aspect of their lives. During the centuries of Jewish history, the Law was preparing for the coming of Christ. The demands of the Law reminded the people that they needed a Saviour. The types and symbols in the Law were pictures of the coming Messiah (see Luke 24:27)" (Wiersbe, 703).

⁹ Wiersbe, 703.

¹⁰ MacArthur, 94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹² *Ibid.*, 101.

¹³ Stott, 102.

¹⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Caste>

¹⁵ <http://www.classicsunveiled.com/romel/html/romechildren.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.classicsunveiled.com/romel/html/romechildren.html>

¹⁷ Remember that the *paidagogos* was himself a slave, and the children were under this slave—in essence, then, they were a slave's slave.

¹⁸ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

¹⁹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 471.

²⁰ Kent, Homer A. Jr. *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians and Philemon*, Revised Ed. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1987. Pp. 86-87.

²¹ Donald K. Campbell, "Galatians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 601.

²² MacArthur, 105.

²³ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

²⁴ "But God has set men free! 'But God....' These are wonderful words, because they show that the entry of the Christian message is at the same time the turning point of history. Apart from these words, life offers no future hope for any man. Man is lost, without hope and without God. But God has intervened in a way that brings an effective and complete salvation" (James Montgomery Boice, "Galatians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976], 472).

²⁵ Much of this information is taken from the class notes for a “History of Christianity” class at Maranatha Baptist Seminary, taught by Dr. David Saxon in the Fall Semester of 2010. You can also simplify the matter by quoting from Wiersbe (706).

Historians tell us that the Roman world was in great expectation, waiting for a Deliverer, at the time when Jesus was born. The old religions were dying; the old philosophies were empty and powerless to change men’s lives. Strange new mystery religions were invading the empire. Religious bankruptcy and spiritual hunger were everywhere. God was preparing the world for the arrival of His Son.

From the historical point of view, the Roman Empire itself helped prepare the world for the birth of the Saviour. Roads connected city with city, and all cities ultimately with Rome. Roman laws protected the rights of citizens, and Roman soldiers guarded the peace. Thanks to both the Greek and Roman conquests, Latin and Greek were known across the empire.

²⁶ The fundamental principle of Roman law and morality was that an action is wrong if it hurts someone else. Therefore, for instance, adultery was a capital offense but other sexual perversions were tolerated. Writing in the early 5th century, the Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo summarized the morals of the Roman empire (*City of God*, II:20). He is speaking in the guise of a Roman defending his society:

The laws should punish offenses against another’s property, not offenses against a man’s own personal character. No one should be brought to trial except for an offense, or threat of offense, against another’s property, house, or person; but anyone should be free to do as he likes about his own, or with his own, or with others, if they consent. There should be a plentiful supply of public prostitutes, for the benefit of all those who prefer them, and especially for those who cannot keep private mistresses. It is a good thing to have imposing houses luxuriously furnished, where lavish banquets can be held, where people can, if they like, spend night and day in debauchery, and eat and drink till they are sick: to have the din of dancing everywhere, and theatres full of fevered shouts of degenerate pleasure and of every kind of cruel and degraded indulgence. Anyone who disapproves of this kind of happiness should rank as a public enemy: anyone who attempts to change it or get rid of it should be hustled out of hearing by the freedom-loving majority.

²⁷ “Some 900 years before Jesus was born God prophesied, ‘I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me’ (Heb. 1:5; 2 Sam. 7:14), indicating that in eternity past that, though there were always three persons in the Trinity, there were not yet the roles of Father and Son. Those designations apparently came into being only at the incarnation. In the announcement of Jesus’ birth to Mary, the angel Gabriel declared, ‘He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; ... the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God’ (Luke 1:32, 35; emphasis added). Son was a new name, never before applied to the second person of the godhead except prophetically, as in Psalm 2:7, which is interpreted in Hebrews 1:5–6 as referring to the event of His incarnation. John wrote, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1). Only when ‘the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us’ as ‘the only begotten God’ (John 1:14, 18) did He take on the role and function of Son” (MacArthur, 108).

²⁸ MacArthur, 108. The full quote is:

He was fully man, born of a woman like all other men, yet He was fully God. Otherwise He could not have been Savior of the world. He had to be fully God in order for His sacrifice to have the infinite worth necessary to atone for the sin of mankind. He also had to be fully man in order to represent mankind and take the penalty of sin upon Himself in man’s behalf. It was man who sinned, who was under the curse, and who was condemned to render his life forfeit to God. Jesus therefore could not have substituted for sinful man on the cross had He not taken upon Himself “the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). He had to be God to have the power of Savior, and He had to be man to have the position of Substitute.

²⁹ *Huios* is also the Greek word used for God’s “Son” in verse 4. This further helps to stress the difference between the bondage of the minor-age child (vv. 1-3) and the privileges of the mature adult-age son (vv. 4-7).

³⁰ “*Huiothesia* (adoption) is a compound of *huios* (son) and *thesis* (a placing) and refers to a man’s giving the status of sonship to someone who is not his natural child. Because men are not naturally the children of God, they can become His sons only by divine adoption. In the Roman world adoption was an honored custom that gave special dignity and family membership to those who were not born into a family. Often a wealthy, childless man would adopt a young slave, who would trade his slavery for sonship, with all its concomitant privileges” (MacArthur, 109).

³¹ Campbell, 601.

³² Boice, 473.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 474.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 473.