

## **GALATIANS 3:23-29**

### **ST JOHN'S, 23.6.19, 9.30 am**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

A few months ago, my son Nathan celebrated his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. He finished his 'A' level exams last week, and is planning to go off to university in September. This is when we find out whether we've been successful in our parenting! He'll no longer have us watching over him, teaching him how to behave, and what the consequences are if he disobeys the rules which we put in place to keep him safe, healthy and happy. Once he leaves the protection of our home, he'll have to fend for himself. But he'll also have the freedom to make his own decisions.

In today's passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul writes about 'before' and 'after' *faith came* (v 23), *Christ came* (v 24). He uses the analogy of coming of age to show firstly what we were before, and then what we are now.

#### **WHAT WE WERE UNDER THE LAW**

Paul describes the law of Moses as *our guardian until Christ came* (v 24). The word 'guardian' could also be translated 'disciplinarian' (NRSV), 'tutor' (NKJV), 'babysitter' (Tom Wright), or 'strict governess' (J B Phillips). Paul's referring to a trusty, elderly slave who had the duty of taking his master's son to and from school, and superintending his conduct. This slave held a position of trust, and many were very harsh in the way they disciplined their charges.

Paul uses another metaphor for the law as well, in v 23: *we were held captive under the law, imprisoned* . . . He's describing something a bit

like protective custody, which restricts the captives movements in order to keep them safe. Paul says that before Christ came, God's law and commandments held us in prison, keeping us confined, so we couldn't escape.

*Before faith came* (v 23), *before Christ came* (v 24), refer to the time between Moses and Jesus, the time when God's people were *held captive under the law*. They also refer what each of us experienced, before we came to faith in Jesus. Human beings have an innate sense of what is morally right or wrong. Every religion and worldview other than Judaeo-Christianity, ultimately teaches that if we 'do good' we earn the favour of the gods, and if we 'do evil', we lose their favour.

What most people fail to realise is that there's a serious flaw in this way of thinking. Paul spells it out earlier in this chapter: *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."* Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law . . . (Galatians 3:10-11). It's impossible for us fully to obey God's law, and therefore we cannot possibly earn his favour. If we try to win God's favour by obeying the law, then we're lost.

Of course, that wasn't the ultimate purpose of the OT law. Rather it was given to teach those who were already God's children how to aspire to behave, and it was given to point us to Christ as the fulfilment of the law. Now that Christ has come, we're no longer *held captive under the law*, we no longer need the law to be *our guardian*.

So let's think about . . .

### WHAT WE ARE IN CHRIST

Paul uses lots of pictures to describe what we are *now that faith has come* (v 25). We're *sons*, or grown-up children, of God (v 26). We've *put on Christ* (v 27). We're *all one in Christ Jesus* (v 28). And we're *Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise* (v 29).

John Stott writes: 'We are neither prisoners, awaiting the final execution of our sentence, nor children, minors, under the restraint of a tutor, but sons of God and heirs of his glorious kingdom, enjoying the status and privileges of grown-up sons.'<sup>1</sup> This comes about because we're *in Christ Jesus . . . through faith* (v 26). Baptised believers *have put on Christ* (v 27) like a garment.

The law was given when God made a covenant with his people through Moses at Mount Sinai. But about 400 years before that, God had made a covenant with Abraham, and Paul has already argued in 3:17-18 that *the law . . . does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void . . . God gave [the inheritance] to Abraham by a promise*. Here, he writes that those who *are Christ's . . . are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise* (v 29).

In Christ, we belong to God. In Christ, we belong to each other. In Christ, we also belong to Abraham. We've joined Abraham's family, the family of faith. God's promise to Abraham's offspring was that they

would inherit the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:8), and that *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Genesis 12:3). That blessing came into complete focus with the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which means that everyone who is *in Christ Jesus*, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – everyone who puts their faith in Christ becomes *Abraham's offspring*, and therefore an heir *according to promise*.

### CONCLUSION

In the few verses before today's passage, Paul showed how God gave a promise to Abraham, and a law to Moses. Through Christ, he fulfilled the promise which the law had shown to be essential. The law condemned sinners to death, while the promise offered us eternal life.

As we consider what it means to be *under the law* or *in Christ*, we have to remember Jesus' own words: *until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished* (Matthew 5:18). We have to acknowledge that the law teaches us what is good and right in God's eyes, that it demands total and perfect obedience; but we also have to realise that we are incapable of living like that, and so we stand condemned by the law. Praise the Lord that *in Christ, through faith* he has set us free, he's made us his own grown up sons and daughters, heirs of his kingdom, and *Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise*.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, The Message of Galatians, (Leicester, IVP, 1992), pp 99