



THE PROMISE OF FREEDOM: A NEW IDENTITY

SERIES: GALATIANS: JOURNEY FROM LAW TO FREEDOM

Galatians 3:15–29

4th Message

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The God of Abraham praise! That hymn, sung as our offertory, is a Christian hymn but with Jewish roots. Its author, Thomas Olivers, visited the Great Synagogue of London where he was moved by the doxology sung every day to open the morning service and close the evening service. Using the same tune, he rewrote the text “in Christian character,” mixing imagery from Old and New Testaments. He transformed a hymn of praise to the God of Israel into praise to the God of all nations; a hymn of praise for the eternal Torah into praise for a crucified Savior.

Our call to worship was from Psalm 72, a royal psalm entitled “For Solomon.” Isaac Watts, the father of English hymnody, rewrote it for Christian worship as *Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun*. He did this for nearly all the psalms, publishing them as *Psalms of David imitated in the language of the New Testament* (1719).

So, we’ve sung two hymns that began life as Jewish texts and were then Christianized. We now have a phrase for this: cultural appropriation. Is this a valid thing to do? What is the relationship between Jews and Christians, between Israel and the Church, between Old and New Testaments, between promise and fulfillment? What allows me, as a Gentile, to sing “Hail Abraham’s God and mine!”?

This may sound familiar to some of you. Six years ago I finished my series on Genesis 1–11 with a sermon on the call of Abraham. I called that sermon “The God of Abraham Praise.”¹ We had the same call to worship from Psalm 72; we sang *Jesus Shall Reign*; the offertory was *The God of Abraham Praise*. There were two differences. In 2011 the phrase “cultural appropriation” wasn’t part of my vocabulary, so I used the word “expropriated.” And in 2011 our Scripture reading was from Galatians 3 and I preached from Genesis 12. Today it’s the other way around.

In many ways today is a repeat of six years ago. In fact, the questions I have just posed are taken verbatim from the 2011 sermon. My answers to those questions then provoked some controversy. These are still controversial questions. This is why we will hold a forum tonight on the topic of “Israel and the Church.” At the heart of this question is the relationship between Genesis 12 and Galatians 3.

Identity can be a complicated, even controversial matter. It is a much more hot-button topic than just six years ago. Identity politics has become an everyday term. The rise of populism here, in Western Europe and elsewhere puts national identity first at the expense of participation in a global community. People are now encouraged to construct their own identities, reinventing themselves if necessary, be it a sexual identity or a gender identity. In the realm of gender identity, what used to be a disorder has been reclassified: Gender Identity Disorder is now Gender Dysphoria (DSM–5, 2013). Earlier this month a genderless ID card was issued to an infant in Canada.

Identity is complicated for me. I’m an adult Third Culture Kid, in the subcategory of Missionary Kid (MK). “Where are you from?”

is an awkward question. I usually answer “Edinburgh,” but I’ve lived there only about three years in multiple short periods. I was born in Edinburgh, spent my early childhood in Thailand, attended boarding school in Malaysia, then boarding school in England. After university I worked on the French–Swiss border and had identity cards for both countries. I came here for a year and am still here 32 years later. Shortly after we were married Sue and I spent six months in Indonesia, which for me felt like going home. We also lived in Canada for 16 months. I grew up used to having my nuclear family scattered across continents. My two sisters and I were married on three different continents. I watched from afar the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 Brexit vote; both concerned my identity as a British citizen born in Scotland. The identity that this life experience has given me is that I am foreign: I’m recognized as foreign wherever I am! But also that I am a global citizen. Twice in the past three years I have been back to my mission boarding school in Malaysia, gathering for six days with my fellow MKs from around the world. We all felt that we had come home.

Many of you have multiple elements contributing to your identity. The Bay Area is a melting pot of peoples. This should be true also of the church; it’s a melting pot of disparate people.

Identity, and the markers of that identity, are both of central importance in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. This was a highly contentious matter. The churches of Galatia were made up of both Jews and Gentiles who had become followers of Jesus. They had taken on a new identity as those who were now “in Christ.” But Jewish agitators had come in, probably from Jerusalem, and were teaching that the Gentile Christians needed to adopt also a second new identity. They needed also to become Jews and observe all the Jewish identity markers, the things which marked Jews out to the rest of the world as unique: circumcision for the men, Sabbath-observance, the dietary laws, and the other things required by the Jewish law. And the Jewish believers needed to maintain those identity markers.

Paul will have none of this and he uses strong language. He makes the daring claim that not only do the Gentiles not need to take on Jewish identity, but that they are already children of Abraham by faith. The promise God made to Abraham has been fulfilled in them. The Jewish identity markers required by the law have nothing to do with this promise. Furthermore, Jews are true children of Abraham not by keeping the law but only by the same faith as the Gentiles. The Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus share a common identity as beneficiaries of God’s promise to Abraham. The law has no part in this identity. This is explosive!

Paul didn’t take his Jewish identity lightly. In his earlier life his identity credentials were flawless: “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely jealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (1:15). He later described his former confidence in his Jewish identity to the Philippians:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Phil 3:4–6 ESV)

But then God “was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (1:16). Everything changed. God gave him a new identity, and so he could write,

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Phil 3:7–8)

His former identity in the law now counted for nothing in light of his new identity in Christ. And God had given him a new mission: to preach the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles so that they too could enter into this new identity.

Recipients of the Spirit (Gal 3:1–14)

Chapter 3 is the heart of Paul’s message about identity. It is a dense chapter, far too much for a single sermon, but there is an advantage in seeing the whole chapter as a unity.

The marker of the Christian’s new identity is that they have received the Holy Spirit. Paul begins the chapter with a series of questions about this Spirit:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? ... Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ... Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ... Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal 3:1–5)

The believers had responded in faith to the gospel they had heard Paul preach, and had then received the Spirit, in whose power they had begun to live. It was a life of freedom: #free2live. None of this had anything to do with the things commanded by the law. But now they have been bewitched into keeping the law.

They had started out so well. Their response of faith had been just like Abraham who “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (3:6; Gen 15:6). Because they share Abraham’s faith they are now the children of Abraham, in fulfillment of God’s promise to him, “In you shall all the nations be blessed” (3:8; Gen 12:3). Faith has led to blessing: inclusion in God’s people and purposes.

How could they be bewitched into now seeking identity in the law (3:10–12)? There are two distinct ways of living life: by works of the law or by faith. The law is not of faith; the one has nothing to do with the other. The law leads not to blessing but to a curse. It is by faith that the righteous person lives, not by the law. Christ is the only one who has ever been fully faithful to the law. He fulfilled its two basic tenets: he loved God and he loved neighbor, taking a very expansive view of neighbor. He alone was not under the curse imposed by the law.

But by being faithful even to death on the cross he voluntarily became a curse on our behalf by being hung on a tree. He has redeemed us “so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (3:14). How is God’s promise to Abraham fulfilled, that “in you shall all the nations be blessed”? It is fulfilled by those who identify with Christ Jesus by faith receiving the Spirit. And so we’re back to where Paul began the chapter: the reception of the

Spirit marks the new identity of the Galatian Christians in Christ. That’s a brief synopsis of the first half of the chapter; now we’re ready for our text, the second half of chapter 3. What is the relationship between the law and the promise?

The Law and the Promise (Gal 3:15–29)

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. (3:15–18)

Paul begins his explanation of the relationship between the promise and the law with a human analogy. Once a man-made covenant has been ratified no one should invalidate it or add to it. For example, one of the points of tension between the Eastern and Western Churches is that Rome unilaterally modified the Nicene Creed, which had been ratified by the whole church gathered in council.

God made a promise, sealed by a covenant, to Abraham and to his seed or offspring. In the Old Testament we understand that seed to be Israel, but Paul daringly states that the seed is actually Christ. He is the focal point of the promise given 2000 years earlier. The law was given 430 years later and it did not annul the promise. The law was given for ethnic Israel but the promise was bigger: it was for all nations. The law was a temporary arrangement for a specific ethnicity. The promise is a permanent arrangement for all nations. Furthermore, a promise is a gift, not something earned by law-keeping. Therefore, inheritance of the promise has nothing to do with the law. Law is about doing; promise is about faith in a gift.

This begs the obvious question:

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. (3:19–20)

Here Paul says three things about the law, each of which indicates its inferiority to the promise. It was added because of sin, it was temporary, and it was enacted by a mediator.

So firstly, the law was given because of transgressions. What is the relationship between law and sin? One possibility is that the law was given to restrain sin. In which case it didn’t work very well for Israel: just forty days after agreeing to keep the law, Israel was engaged in rampant idolatry with the golden calf. Law in general can produce compliant people, but they are not necessarily flourishing people. They might be compliant because their spirit is broken. Or externally compliant while seething with rebellious anger inside. Or compliant while indulging internal thoughts opposed to the law. So Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said...but I say unto you...” (Matt 5). For example, people can avoid adultery while harboring lustful intent. Paul will state in the next chapter that law produces slaves not sons. The law is not able to transform people. But Christians have been very good at devising rules as tools to restrain sin. It didn’t work for Israel and it doesn’t work today.

Another possibility is that the law was given to define sin. It certainly did that. Without the law Paul would not have known what sin was. But such knowledge just confirms that one is a sinner, under the curse of the law.

A third option is that the law provided a way to deal with sin, by providing a sacrificial system. It did do that, but that could be only a temporary measure because ultimately the blood of bulls and goats cannot atone for sin.

A fourth option is that the law was given to increase sin. It worked spectacularly, so much so that all of Israel fell under the curse of the law. All except for one, Jesus the true Israelite, the one faithful Israelite. He alone fulfilled the law.

Secondly, the law was temporary; it was added only for a season, “until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made,” namely Jesus; he is the Seed of Abraham. The promise predated the law, and the fulfillment of the promise would indicate the end of the law.

Thirdly, the law was inferior because it was put in place by a mediator, Moses. After God delivered the Hebrews from Egypt he brought them to Mt Sinai to meet with him. But they found God’s presence so terrifying that they begged Moses to play the role of mediator: “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Exod 20:19). But the promise was made directly to Abraham by God himself.

So in these three ways the promise is superior to the law.

Paul anticipates another question:

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. (3:21–22)

Since the law is so different from the promise, is it then contrary to the promise? Not at all, says Paul emphatically. The law was not competing with the promise. They served two completely different purposes. The law that was given was not a life-giving law, and was never intended as the vehicle for the fulfillment of the promise. Quite the opposite! The law was a prison, beyond which lay freedom—not in the law, but in fulfillment of the promise in Jesus Christ to those who believe. Paul sees a vast gulf between the promise given directly to Abraham and the law mediated through Moses. The one has nothing to do with the other.

How then does one escape the prison of the law and become an heir to the promise? Paul elaborates on the metaphor of captivity.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (3:23–26)

Paul divides time into “before faith came” and “now that faith has come.” Law belonged only to the former period “before faith came.” Paul describes the law as a “guardian” (Gk *paidagōgos*). Our English word pedagogue means “teacher” but that’s not the meaning of the Greek word, despite some English translations: schoolmaster (KJV), tutor (NASB). In ancient Greco-Roman society the *paidagōgos* was a household slave who supervised the young boys, aged 6–16, including escorting them to and from school. Imagine boys who

would much rather be up to mischief, such as stealing pears from the tree over the wall, than sitting in school. Boys who would rather transgress than obey the slave. For days I had been wondering how to translate this word; I finally came up with the modern equivalent: cat-herder. For a *paidagōgos*, supervising young boys would be like herding cats. But just as the *paidagōgos* was a temporary role until the boy reached maturity, so the law was temporary until Christ came. Now faith has come: both the one who is faithful, that is Jesus, and our response of faith in him and his faithfulness. With the coming of Christ and the coming of faith, the law’s work is done; it is over. The Galatian Christians have responded to the good news about Christ Jesus in faith, and now they are sons of God. As sons they are full heirs—and this includes the women.

Paul ends the chapter with a description of the new identity now that faith has come.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 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. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (3:27–29)

Paul uses two metaphors to describe this new identity. We have been baptized into Christ and we have put on Christ as a new garment. Baptism is not simply an ordinance, something we do because our Lord commanded it. It is a symbol, one might say a sacrament. It is a visible physical act that represents an invisible spiritual reality. We identify with the Lord Jesus in his death and resurrection; indeed, we participate with him in death and resurrection. We plunge below the waters and we rise to newness of life. We put off the old self and we put on the new self. In the early church this was enacted physically. The baptismal candidate would throw off his old robe, enter into the baptismal pool, emerge the other side, and be clothed with a new robe. Then he or she would be admitted to the eucharist, the other great symbol of participation in Christ.

Baptized into Christ with a new identity, we experience a new unity, a unity that transcends ethnic, socio-economic, and gender differences. These differences still exist but our unity in Christ is deeper still. There is still “Jew and Gentile,” but in Christ we have a new belonging that transcends ethnicity. “Slave and free” persisted for many centuries, but Paul wrote to Philemon on how he should welcome his runaway slave back as a brother. There is still “male and female,” but a woman is no longer worth half of a man.

I saw this unity worked out in Thailand, where my parents were missionaries and both worked with lepers. Fifty percent of the early converts in central Thailand were lepers. Two churches formed: a “well” church and a leper church, with the leper church spiritually healthier than the “well” church. It took many years for the “well” church to fully accept the leper church. But finally the two churches joined and became one, a beautiful picture of unity and equality in Christ Jesus.

Finally, all those who belong to Christ are Abraham’s seed, and heirs to the promise. Who are the children of Abraham? Jew and Gentile alike who by faith participate in Christ, the Seed of Abraham. The distinction between Israel and the rest of mankind is over. It has been replaced by the distinction between those who are “in Christ” and those who are not, those who are of faith and those who are not, regardless of ethnicity, of socio-economic status, and of gender. Whether you are Jew or Gentile makes no difference at all. All peoples find their true identity only in Christ.

It was easy for the first century Roman world to identify the Jews. The Jews had a strong sense of identity, and their identity markers were clear for all the world to see: the works of the law such as circumcision, sabbath-observance, dietary laws, purity laws. What are our identity markers? How does the world identify Christians? Do they say, “They’re the people who have lots of rules, especially ‘Thou shalt not,’” or “They’re the people who are quick to judge others”? Or do they say, “They’re the people who practice a deep unity and equality among themselves; they’re the people who love God and love neighbor; they’re the people who show ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control’ not just among themselves but to others”? Such is the fruit of the Spirit, to which Paul turns in chapter 5. Life in the Spirit and unity and equality in Christ are our identity markers.

So what is my identity? I think that growing up in so many different cultures has helped reinforce in me that my primary identity, the only identity that really matters, is that I am in Christ, and that I’m part of a global community, made up of many peoples who are all equal and one in Christ. What is your identity? We are all one and equal in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1. Bernard Bell, “The God of Abraham Praise (Gen 11:10-12:7),” August 4, 2011, #1599; 37th message in series “Our Story of Origins.”

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