

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON FIFTY-TWO)

“ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLES”

GALATIANS 4:1-3

(ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION)

1 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,

2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

3 In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

In his introduction to **Galatians** chapter 4, **Warren Wiersbe** makes the following remarks:

“One of the tragedies of legalism is that it gives the appearance of spiritual maturity when, in reality, it leads the believer back into a ‘second childhood’ of Christian experience. The Galatian Christians, like most believers, wanted to grow and go forward for Christ; but they were going about it in the wrong way. Their experience is not too different from that of Christians today who get involved in various legalistic movements, hoping to become better Christians. Their motives may be right, but their methods are wrong.

This is the truth Paul is trying to get across to his beloved converts in Galatia. The Judaizers had bewitched them into thinking that the Law

would make them better Christians. Their old nature felt an attraction for the Law because the Law enabled them to do things and measure external results. As they measured themselves and their achievements, they felt a sense of accomplishment and, no doubt, a little bit of pride. They thought they were going forward when actually they were regressing."

In this section of his letter, Paul expands on his analogy in verses **24-26** of the previous chapter, of a child's coming of age. He contrasts the lives of believers **before** they were saved, with their lives **after** they were saved. He compares them, before they are saved to **children** and **servants**, and he compares them to **adults** and **sons** after they are saved. Both his Jewish and Gentile readers in Galatia would have understood this imagery, since the Jews, Greeks, and Romans all had ceremonies to mark a child's coming of age.

In verses **1** and **2**, he writes,

1 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.

2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.

In order to illustrate the spiritual immaturity of those who live under the Mosaic Law, or any other system of rule-keeping, Paul informs the Galatian believers of certain characteristics of an heir as a minor **child**, in contrast with an adult **son**. He explains that even though the heir may be the owner of an entire estate by virtue of his birthright, as a child, he is nevertheless in a subservient condition in that he enjoys no freedom and can make no decisions. In fact the heir, as a child, is under guardians and managers. This is true until he comes of age as a son.

The word "*child*" in verse **1** is a translation of the Greek word **népios**: (**nay'-pee-os**), which literally means, "one that does not speak," and refers to a small child above the age of a helpless infant but probably not

more than three or four years of age. Figuratively, **népios** refers to a person who lacks experience, is untried, ignorant or simple-minded. The word refers to an immature person, intellectually and morally.

In **1 Corinthians 3:1-3**, we read the following:

*1 But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as **infants** in Christ.*

2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready,

3 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

The word “*infants*” in verse **1** is a translation of the Greek word **népios**.

The word is also used in **Hebrews 5:13**: “*For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a **child**.*” The word “*child*” is a translation of **népios**.

Paul uses this word in **Galatians 4:1**, to describe the person who is under the Law. He or she is treated as an immature person. An adult for instance, is old enough to govern his or her own actions. A child must have restraints put upon him or her. Paul says, “*He is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father.*” This is also the case in the spiritual world. Israel under the Law was treated like a minor, not as an adult.

In verses **22-23** of chapter **3**, Paul described the Law as a “jailor” which kept all in custody. In verses **24-25**, he personified the Law as a **paidagógos**-a legally appointed overseer, authorized to train up a child. Now, he changes the metaphor to “*guardians*” and “*managers.*” Under Roman law, boys, from their birth to the age of 14, were under the charge of legal guardians, and then from the age of 14 to the age of 25, their property was administered by managers. The “*guardian*” was the overseer of the child’s **person**, while the “*manager*” was the

overseer of the child's **property**. However Roman law did give Roman fathers some discretion in setting the time of their son's transition from boyhood to manhood. This sets the stage for Paul's statement in **Galatians 4:4**, that God the Father chose the time that His Son would bring His people into maturity.

Paul says, "*He is under guardians and managers **until the date set by his father.***" The word "*until*" is time sensitive. It specifies that something happens, or is in place **until** an appointed time. When the appointed time arrives there is a cessation of whatever was happening, or was in place during the period before the appointed time. In this context, what ceases is the subjection of the child to the guardians and managers.

The words, "*the date set,*" are the translation of a Greek word which was an Athenian legal term referring to an appointed time for the termination of the minority. This time was set by the father of the child. It was the father who determined when the child was no longer subject to guardians and managers. Under Roman law the age of maturity for a child was set by his father and involved a ceremonial putting-on of the **toga virilis** and his formal acknowledgement as the son and heir. (The **toga virilis** was a distinctive garment of ancient Rome that symbolized manhood. It was a roughly semicircular cloth, between 12 and 20 feet in length, draped over the shoulders and around the body. It was usually woven from white wool, and was worn over a tunic.)

Paul uses this analogy in reference to the condition of believers prior to the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This intervention took place "*when the fullness of time had come*" (**Galatians 4:4**).

In verse **3**, he writes, "*In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.*"

The word "*children*" is a translation of the same Greek word **népios** which was translated "*child*" in verse **1**. As we stated earlier, the word is used figuratively to refer to a person who lacks experience, is untried,

ignorant or simple-minded. The word refers to an immature person, intellectually and morally.

Paul says, “*We were children.*” Who is the “we” that he refers to? He is probably referring to both the Jews and the Gentiles in the Galatian church. He is informing them that before they were saved, they were, “*enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.*” He includes himself because he, like them, had been a slave to the same principles before he was saved.

The Greek word translated “*enslaved*” is in the **perfect tense** indicating that this is the continuous state of every human being in Adam, before their salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, places them “in Christ,” as a result of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. In short, before we were saved, we were all in the fixed state of slaves to the elementary principles of the world.

The phrase, “*elementary principles*” is a translation of the Greek word **stoicheion: (stoy-khi’-on)**. “**Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament,**” furnishes the following meaning of the word:

“The word denotes specifically:

1 the letters of the alphabet as the elements of speech...

2 the elements from which all things have come, the material causes of the universe.

3 the heavenly bodies, either as parts of the heavens, or (as others think) because in them the elements of man's life and destiny were supposed to reside...

4 the elements, rudiments, primary and fundamental principles (cf. our 'alphabet' or 'a b c') **of any art, science, or discipline...** the rudiments with which mankind... were indoctrinated before the time of

Christ, i. e. the elements of religions training, or the ceremonial precepts common alike to the worship of Jews and of Gentiles.”

Stoicheion describes something orderly in arrangement as for example of things in a row and hence an element. In most of its uses, it denotes an elementary or fundamental principle in a subject or discipline. It refers to the first principles of something, for example, the basics or fundamentals of Christianity.

The “**Jewish New Testament Commentary**,” has a very interesting comment on the phrase:

“Elemental spirits of the universe...We, both Jews and Gentiles, were slaves to them. Gentiles served these demonic spirits as gods. Jews, though knowing the one true God, were sometimes led astray by demonic spirits, including the demonic spirit of legalism. Jews served this spirit whenever they perverted the Torah into a legalistic system...”

The Greek word translated “*world*” is **kosmos**. The basic meaning of the word was “order.” It was used to refer to the universe from the fact of its perfectly ordered arrangement. It also meant, “An ornament, decoration, dress,” especially of women. **Kosmos** was also used to refer to the inhabitants of the earth.

Kenneth Wuest comments that,

“The word **kosmos** is used to refer to the world system, wicked and alienated from God yet cultured, educated, powerful, outwardly moral at times, the system of which Satan is the head, the fallen angels...are his servants, and all mankind other than the saved, are his subjects. This includes those people, pursuits, pleasures, purposes, and places where God is not wanted...It refers also to the human race, fallen, totally depraved...It may have reference to the created universe...It

may also refer simply to mankind without any particular reference to man's fallen and wicked condition."

The "*elementary principles of the world*" probably refers here to the first principles of non-Christian humanity; in the case of the Jew, it is a reference to the symbolic and ceremonial character of Judaism and its legal enactments, and in the case of the Gentiles, it is a reference to the ceremonial and ritualistic observances of the pagan religions.

Wiersbe explains that,

"No matter how wealthy a father may be, his infant son or toddling child cannot really enjoy that wealth. In the Roman world, the children of wealthy people were cared for by slaves. No matter who his father was, the child was still a child, under the supervision of a servant. In fact, the child himself was not much different from the servant who guarded him. The servant was commanded by the master of the house, and the child was commanded by the servant.

This was the spiritual condition of the Jews under the age of the Law. The Law, you recall, was the 'guardian' that disciplined the nation and prepared the people for the coming of Christ (**Galatians 3:23-25**). So, when the Judaizers led the Galatians back into legalism, they were leading them not only into religious bondage, but also into moral and spiritual infancy and immaturity.

Paul states that the Jews were, like little children, in bondage to 'the elements of the world.' This word elements means the basic principles, the **ABCs**. For some fifteen centuries, Israel had been in kindergarten and grade school, learning their 'spiritual **ABCs**,' so that they would be ready when Christ would come. Then they would get the full revelation, for Jesus Christ is 'the Alpha and the Omega' (**Revelation 22:13**); He encompasses all the alphabet of God's revelation to man. He is God's last Word (**Hebrews 1:1-3**).

Legalism, then, is not a step toward maturity, it is a step back into childhood. The Law was not God's final revelation; it was but the preparation for that final revelation in Christ. It is important that a person know his **ABCs**, because they are the foundation for understanding all of the language. But the man who sits in a library and recites the **ABCs** instead of reading the great literature that is around him, is showing that he is immature and ignorant, not mature and wise. Under the Law, the Jews were children in bondage, not sons enjoying liberty."

It is of adult sons, not of minor children that Paul writes in **Romans 8:14**, "*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*"

William Newell in his commentary on these verse writes the following:

"*Sons*' means 'adult-sons,' sons come of age...The term, when referring to saints, is applied in Paul's epistles both to Christ...and to those associated with Him since His resurrection...therefore to His own saints, sealed by the Spirit...Being '*led by the Spirit*' does not refer here to service, nor to 'guidance' in particular paths. It refers to that **general control** by the blessed Spirit of those born of the Spirit, living by the Spirit, in the Spirit. He is the sphere and mode of their being, and is their seal unto the day of redemption..."

Israel received a spirit of bondage when they were placed under the Law. And how sad that perhaps the most of Christians regard themselves as under the Law and so under bondage."

In verse **15** he writes, "*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'*"

We will conclude our Lesson this evening by reading **Colossians 2:6-23**, from the **New Living Translation**:

6 And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him.

7 Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.

*8 Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers (**stoicheion**) of this world, rather than from Christ.*

9 For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body.

10 So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.

11 When you came to Christ, you were "circumcised," but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature.

12 For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.

13 You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.

14 He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

15 In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.

16 So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths.

17 For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.

18 Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud,

19 and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.

*20 You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers (**stoicheion**) of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as,*

21 "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"?

22 Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them.

23 These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.