

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER
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Series: Special Messages
Text: Galatians 3: 23 – 29
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Set Free in Christ

Rob Bell, one of the more high-profile voices in what goes by the name *The Emergent Church*, has recently created a fire storm with his new book *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. *The NY Times*, *CNN*, and *USA Today* have taken notice of Bell's controversial book. Bell advocates a very subtle form of universalism i.e. in the end everybody will be in heaven. For our purposes, one of the most dangerous errors in the book is the categorical denial of any notion of penal substitutionary atonement. Bell denies the reality of God's wrath against sin. He rejects the biblical picture of the cross of Christ as a wrath-bearing sacrifice for sin (Romans 3:25), that Jesus was actually *smitten of God* (Isaiah 53:4, 10) and was *cursed* by God (Galatians 3:13). Bell declares: "Many people have heard the gospel framed in terms of rescue. God has to punish sinners, because God is holy, but Jesus has paid the price for our sin, and so we can have eternal life. However true or untrue that is technically or theologically, what it can do is subtly teach people that Jesus rescues us from God. Let's be very clear, then: we do not need to be rescued from God" (p. 182). This is stunning. Among other things, Bell is explicitly denying that sin is a serious violation of the Law of God and as such deserves God's wrath. For Bell, the Law of God is merely a means of helping people attain personal happiness here and now with no reference whatsoever to future consequences. The Old Testament with its prophecies, ceremonies, types and institutions, is a preparation for Christ. It points forward to Him and there is a progression from the promise to Abraham through the Law to the fulfillment of the promises in Christ. The Old Testament is, therefore, not to be discarded or despised. In fact, the Apostle Paul is building his case for justification by faith alone on the Old Testament! In this section he is answering an implicit objection to his doctrine that it in effect overthrew the Law. Not so, says the Apostle. The Law was *never* intended to give life. Its purpose was to convince people of the true character of their sin (3:19 - 22). In the rest of this chapter Paul will develop this in detail. He will seek to show the inferiority of the condition of people under the Law and the temporary character of the statutes.

I. THE CONFINEMENT OF THE LAW

In verse 22 Paul points out how the Law brought bondage. It revealed the sinfulness of sin with the result that no one is clear of guilt.

A. The Figure of the Prison

Paul's language in verses 22 - 23 graphically portrays how the law served to *shut in* everyone to the consequences of sin. The Law was a jailor. Two words are used to describe this. The first word PHROUREŌ, "were kept" (KJV) "held prisoner" (NIV), was used of guards doing sentry duty. It is important to note that this verb is in the imperfect tense, expressing durative action in past time. The other word SUNKLEIŌ, "shut up" (KJV) "locked up" (NIV), is the same word we found in verse 22.¹ The Law brought confinement—its function was entirely adverse.

B. The Figure of the Slave-Guardian

In verse 24 he refers to the Law as being a PAIDAGŌGOS. This term was used for the attendant whose duties consisted of escorting a small child to and from school—and of enforcing strict disciplinary duties, especially moral ones on the child.² The Law, in this sense, was to be the means of bringing us to Christ in that it would demonstrate our absolute helplessness and thus turn us to the Savior.

II. THE FREEDOM OF SONSHIP

The only hope was not a super PAIDAGŌGOS or instructor (a new Law) but an actual redeemer who could set us free from bondage.

A. Sonship by Faith (verses 25 - 26)

The KJV has the word "But" at the opening of verse 25. This is in keeping with the Greek text which has the adversative and serves to introduce a shift. Since Christ (Paul uses the word *faith* in this context to refer to *faith in Christ*) has come we are no longer *slaves* but *sons*. God no longer is seen simply as a judge to execute the penalty of the broken Law (Christ bore this)—He is now, since the coming of faith, the Father, and the sons are adult sons and no longer children. We are sons, therefore, not by virtue of creation but by faith in Christ.

B. Union with Christ (verses 27 - 28)

The "for" of verse 27 explains how this sonship came about. *Baptism* here refers to the work of the Holy Spirit who baptizes into Christ (Romans 6:3; I Corinthians 12:12 - 13). The figure of putting on Christ is an allusion to putting on a garment. "The expression," notes Guthrie, "conveys a striking suggestion of the closeness which exists between Christ and the believer."³ (cf. Romans 13:12; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:12f)

NOTE: Verse 28 is sometimes appealed to in order to repudiate any and all distinctions between male and female in the Church (i.e. women are on the same level as men and should therefore be eligible to be ordained.)⁴ This is manifestly not Paul's point. He is referring to *spiritual blessing in Christ*, specifically to *union with Christ*—and in this sense there is no difference. *But* there are different roles and functions in the family and in the Church.

C. Abraham's Seed and Heirs (verse 29)

Paul now concludes his argument “and if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.” Christians are now fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. Gentile Christians are no longer foreigners to the covenants of the promise (Ephesians 2:11 - 22) but are now grafted into the Abrahamic root (Romans 11:11 - 21).

CONCLUSION: Rob Bell does not like the idea of God being angry because he thinks of anger as a sin. But God's anger is not like ours. He does not lose his temper. His wrath is the inevitable outworking of his holiness and justice, as it was with the Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 3:5). Claims that our anger is without sin may well conceal wounded pride. But God cannot be guilty of sin. His judgments are *always* righteous. As the apostle says, on ‘the day of God's wrath...his *righteous* judgment will be revealed’ (Romans 2:5). Bell can't understand how God can be angry and loving at the same time. But God's displeasure with sin and his love for sinners are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the sending of Jesus to turn God's anger away from us is the greatest possible expression of his love which is exactly what the apostle John said: ‘*This is love*: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice (propitiation) for our sins’ (I John 4:10 and John 3:16). Likewise, we must not think that by his sacrifice Jesus *persuaded* his Father not to be angry with us, and to change his anger into love. It was God himself who presented Jesus as a propitiation for our sins ‘so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus’ (Romans 3:25, 26). God was under no obligation to save us from his wrath, but once having determined to do so, the death of his beloved Son was the only way. God's law *must* be fulfilled and only Jesus could do that. Sonship, union and heirship are the blessings delivered by faith in Christ. The Law cannot give us these things—it can, however, bring us to Christ by showing us the seriousness of sin. The pressing question is this: Have *you* come face to face with the Law so that you clearly see your sin, guilt and condemnation? And have you fled to Christ as your only Savior? The Old Puritan divine Ezekiel Hopkins long ago wrote. “We cannot be personally righteous by perfect Obedience, because of the corruptions of our natures: we cannot be personally righteous by full Satisfaction, because of the condition of our natures. Our corrupt state makes our perfect obedience a thing impossible; and our limited finite state makes our full satisfaction as impossible. As we are fallen sinners, we lie under a sad necessity of transgressing the Law: as we are vile creatures, so we lie under an utter incapacity of recompensing divine justice. Well, therefore, might the Apostle cry out, *There is none righteous: no, not one*: Rom. iii.10. As for a personal righteousness of obedience, the Prophet unfolds that goodly garment: Isa. lxiv. 6; *All our righteousnesses are but as filthy rags*: rags they are; and, therefore, cannot cover our nakedness: filthy rags they are; and, therefore, need a covering for themselves. To think to cover filth by filth, is nothing else, but to make both more odious in the sight of God. Nor can we hope to appear before God upon a Righteousness of Satisfaction: for how should we satisfy his justice? Is it by Doing? Whatsoever we can do, is, God's gift; our own duty, had we never sinned; and, can bear no proportion to the sin committed: for no duty is of infinite goodness; but every sin is of infinite heinousness, as hath been demonstrated; and therefore no duty can make satisfaction for it. Is it by Suffering, that we hope we may satisfy God? Alas! this is nothing else, but to seek salvation by being damned: for that is the penal part of the Law; and the only personal satisfaction, that the justice of God will exact of sinners.”⁵ According to Rob Bell it really does not matter one way or the other. The Bible says otherwise.

ENDNOTES

¹ This is translated “a prisoner of sin” in the NIV (verse 22). The word vividly describes being incarcerated. It means “to shut in on all sides” with no possibility of escape. The word was actually used in reference to a prison in Paul's day and time. Cf. J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 609.

² *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based On Semantic Domain I*, eds. J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida (United Bible Societies, 1988), p. 466.

³ D. Guthrie, *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 110.

⁴ This is the favorite text of feminists. Ruth A. Schmidt is representative of those who refer to themselves as Evangelical feminists and contend that Galatians 3:28 effectively overturns all those other texts like I Timothy 2:12, cf. her article “Second-class Citizenship in the Kingdom of God” in *Our Struggle to Serve: The Stories of 15 Evangelical Women*, ed. Virginia Hearn (Word, 1979).

⁵ *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins II* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), p. 144.