

Longing for the Nursery (A Coming of Age Story)

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn to our Bibles and to Paul's letter to the Galatians. And we're reading this evening from midway through chapter 3 to midway through chapter 4.

It's page 973, if you have one of our visitors' Bibles. And last Sunday evening, I surmised because I wasn't here, we were looking at the first part of chapter 3, and Paul there is speaking about the salvation that is in Christ, which has always been from the very beginning by faith, always been from the very beginning by the promise of God.

But he comes now to this question at verse 19, which is, if that is so, then where does the law of God come in, the law of Moses?

What part does that have in the story of God's promise? And what part does it have in the whole question of how God saves people and how people are to live?

What's it all about? Why, then, the law? That was a big question for the Galatian believers because all the controversy that the false teachers were bringing into the church surrounded the whole business of the law of Moses.

[1 : 20] So it's important that Paul tackles it, and now he does. Why, then, the law? Well, he says, 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. Is the law, then, contrary to the promises of God?

No, 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 the faith of Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

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.

Paul's speaking there as a Jew, of course. 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.

[2 : 48] 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 neither 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.

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, we were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his son, born of a 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.

[4 : 02] And if a son, then an heir through God. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those who are by nature 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'm afraid I may have labored over you in vain. Amen.

May God bless to us this, his word, and help us to understand the great promise of its message. Well, do please find your Bibles and open them to page 973.

Galatians chapter 3 from verse 19. And there's an excellent sermon on the first half of this passage on the Tron website, preached about 10 years ago.

[5 : 08] Willie began by saying, I can promise you clarity, but not necessarily concision. And I think it's fair to say he delivered on both of those promises. I'm aiming for concision tonight, but if I fall short on the clarity, you know where to find another attempt.

I'd recommend you have a listen to that. So let's pray, shall we? Thou my great father, I thy true son.

Lord God, we come to you tonight as children who are hungry and needy and asking our father for food. And so we pray, Lord, that by your spirit, you'd help us tonight.

Give us what we need to keep trusting you this week. Amen. What's the secret to a perfect honeymoon? I guess like most young men, I looked forward to my honeymoon with a lot of excitement.

But actually, what made it so special wasn't any of the things I'd planned so carefully. It wasn't the beautiful little island we escaped to. It wasn't the rustic little cottage I'd spent so long searching for.

[6 : 18] It wasn't even the little hidden waterfall that we found to swim in. No, the thing which made our honeymoon so special was this. My father-in-law was nowhere to be seen.

I spent that time with my wife and not her dad. Now, don't get me wrong. My father-in-law's a pretty cool guy to hang out with. He's a man who for 22 years flew F-18 fighter jets off US aircraft carriers. He's a pretty impressive guy. So if any of you think you had it tough asking for permission to marry, I have no sympathy whatsoever. But this man took his duties as a father very seriously.

He brought his children up to know the Lord with real loving discipline. And that's something I will forever be thankful for. But you see, he had a goal in bringing up his daughter.

And that goal was to give her away well when the day of her wedding arrived. Which meant that once we were married, in one sense, his job was done.

[7 : 26] It's not that he didn't still love his daughter. It's not that she wanted to forget everything he ever taught her. But his role as the one who made the decisions and governed her time and set the rules, that role had come to an end.

And I reckon he had no more interest in sticking around for his daughter's honeymoon than either of we did. Well, coming of age, coming of age is a wonderful, exciting thing, isn't it?

Adulthood opens up a whole new world of relationships and privilege and adventure. And tonight's passage is a coming of age story. It tells the story of Israel's childhood and then the wonderful life God had planned for her when she was ready.

But Paul tells this story here for a very important reason. His readers are worried that now they've become Christian, they need to go back to Moses to convert to a Jewish religious way of life to stay on the right side of God.

But to do that now, after Jesus himself had come into the world, that would be like taking your father-in-law along for the honeymoon.

[8 : 42] Because like him, Moses had a particular goal in bringing up his people and that was to prepare them for the wedding day. And what a tragic thing it would be to miss out on Jesus because you were happy enough playing around with religion, hanging out with Moses.

Paul spent the first half of chapter three, if you remember last week, arguing about what the law wasn't. It wasn't a second way to earn acceptance with God, as if he gave his gracious promise to Abraham and then a different kind of promise through Moses.

No, all the way through, the way to God was faith in his promise concerning Jesus and his cross. But that leaves an important question, a question Paul steps aside briefly to answer now.

If the law was never about earning love from God, then verse 19, what was it for? And he doesn't mean just the Ten Commandments, the law in that narrow sense of right and wrong.

It's taken for granted, I think, in this letter that God's character doesn't change. What he calls good, what he loves, those things bind all people everywhere. But what was the point of Israel's whole history?

[10 : 05] The law as a whole religious way of life for all those years under Moses. Well, Paul's answer is that it was all to do with coming of age.

He makes the point simply and clearly in verses 19 and 20. The law was a limited measure to protect God's people for a specific period in history.

And then the rest of the passage will explain and apply that for his worried, insecure Christians in Galatia. It's a before and after story. Notice that.

All the way down to verse 24, it's about life until Jesus came. It's about Israel's childhood. And then verse 25 introduces the but now.

But now that faith has come, that is Jesus, the object of Israel's faith, now he's come when no longer under a guardian. And so verse 25 to the end explains what life is like now the church has come of age.

[11:10] Two halves then and two points and two ages of the church, one BC and one AD. Why did God give Israel the law?

Well, verses 19 to 24, because this world is a dangerous place for children. Moses' job was to guard and protect Israel until the day came to deliver her safely into Jesus' arms.

The law's job was to serve God's gospel, to keep people under grace until in God's good timing he delivered on what he promised Abraham.

Now, why did they need that protection while they waited for Christ? Well, because this world is a dangerous place and the danger is what, in verse 19, Paul calls transgression, sin, the human addiction to violating God's boundaries.

That's a problem human beings cannot escape and God knew how dangerous that problem was for his children. How easy it would have been for this special line of people, the people through whom the world's savior would come to just be swallowed up by that world, adopt its ways and absorb its cultures and lose sight of the wonderful, unique, gracious promise God had made them.

[12:41] And not only was sin out there a problem for them, a danger to them, but their own sin had potential to be just as deadly. Deadly enough that over the years many of them did walk away from the gospel altogether, grew proud, forgot the Lord and his promises.

But God could not allow that to happen, could he? His salvation plan for all people everywhere depended on preserving one little line of sons until Christ came.

So verses 19 and 20 give us the main point in a very compact way. Three things, I think. It tells us about the law. It tells us why the law was given. Firstly, it was given because of sin, transgression. It tells us how long the law was given for. It was until something, until the offspring should come. In other words, Israel's whole system of life and worship was only ever a temporary, short-term measure.

And thirdly, it tells us the law's goal. It was to safeguard God's gracious promise until that offspring arrived. In fact, it always stood as a servant to God's original plan.

[14:00] I could bore you all night, I think, with my guess as to what verse 20 means, and we'd probably still be none the wiser, but whatever that verse means, it shows that God's promise always had precedent over his law, over Israel's law.

The law came mediated, didn't it, through angels and through Moses, and that jarred with God's character. It was partial, incomplete, because God wanted closeness, oneness between himself and his people, between his people and other peoples, Gentiles.

God wanted oneness. He's one. That's what he promised. And that promise always came first. So there's his point in two little verses.

The law was a temporary childhood measure to serve God's promise in the face of human sin. And then the next two paragraphs just unpack all of that.

We get a couple of similar pictures and each one develops those points again. Each one shows us how the law protected Israel from sin. Each one stresses that it was a temporary job.

[15:08] And each one shows how that served God's promise. So verse 21, did the law compete with the gospel? Was it another offer, a way to win righteousness?

No. In fact, what it did was show the whole world why Israel's Messiah was so badly needed? And Paul paints his first picture here to show how that worked.

A picture of a prison cell, a dungeon of gloom and despair. But don't misunderstand the picture. The law isn't the prison.

No, the prison is something all human beings were trapped in. Long before Moses, the prison is sin. But the problem when you've been trapped in darkness for all that time is that you start to quite like it.

Prison begins to feel safe. It feels like it's where we belong. Sin just feels like part of us. In fact, the truth is that we don't really mind all the ugliness anymore.

[16:14] That's what happens to someone who's incarcerated. And so the law came along and turned on the lights. It showed us the prison bars. And that's why in verse 22 he calls it scripture.

In the law, God reveals something. He reveals the ugliness inside our hearts. How unlike we are to the goodness and love and purity of our maker.

The law said to mankind that everyone without distinction, Jew and Gentile, good person, bad person, rich person, poor person, the whole of humanity is imprisoned by the same stinking, self-centered sin.

And I suppose scripture still tells us that today, doesn't it? Any human being who's truly faced with God's goodness and love, whether that's in the law or in Jesus himself, when we're faced with that, we do come away feeling condemned, don't we?

We see God and we realize something about ourselves. but notice that crushing people was not the aim of God's law, no.

[17:26] The reason God shone that light into humanity's prison, verse 22, was to keep his people Israel looking for Jesus' cross to show them how badly they needed what God had graciously promised.

And so Israel's system of laws and worship and sacrifice kept them trusting that one day Jesus would fix their brokenness through his faithfulness.

Well, verses 23 and 24 develop that picture for us again. As well as holding them captive under sin, convicted and aware of their needs, the law also held Israel captive under kindness like a parent putting their children under curfew and out of trouble.

The picture this time is of a guardian or a pedagogue. It's a Greek word. In a Greek household, that was the servant put in charge of the children to take them to school and enforce the rules and dish out the punishments, the pedagogue.

And I guess you can imagine how children felt about their guardians. That doesn't really change, does it? Often, these were satirized in plays and poetry as a kind of ogre, someone you feared and respected but secretly grew quite fond of over time.

[18:51] If you've got kids, think Nanny McPhee, not Mary Poppins. And if you're lucky enough to have never watched either, never mind. Mary Poppins, she does things the Hollywood way.

It's all about sweet songs and spoonfuls of sugar. And frankly, she's so perfect that every downtrodden mum watches and wants to slit her wrists in despair. Nanny McPhee is brilliant though.

She does all the things we parents wish we could do to our horrid little kids but know we'd be locked up for in the real world. But in the end, the children always come to see that she loved them and that for a while they needed her discipline.

Well, that was the pedagogue, the guardian. The law kept Israel safe from the world outside and sin in them. But children can't stay in the nursery forever, can they?

And while it was good and right for a time, God's people came of age the day Israel's Messiah rose from the dead. So having explained the role of the law in Israel's history, Paul goes on in verse 25, to apply that to God's people today.

[20:07] Yes, this world is a dangerous place for children. But secondly, from verse 25 through to chapter 4, verse 11, the nursery is a tragic place for a grown son.

There's something heartbreaking, isn't there, about an adult who still longs for all the security and institutions of his childhood, who's never at home in the real world of relationships and decisions. And God wanted so much more than that for his people. God does not want to be your school teacher or your jailer. He wants you to be like a son to him, a grown son who he knows and loves and trusts.

And that is what all of Israel's history was about, bringing them into a real, mature relationship. To be called a son, that was Israel's great privilege back in the Old Testament, wasn't it?

Israel and her kings were God's sons. But that word has an overtone that I don't think you and I quite think of today. To have a son didn't just mean having a little boy.

[21:22] It meant having an heir. A son implied posterity, not a baby, but someone who'd take on the family name.

The word son in this story brings with it the idea of maturity. Someone who relates to God the way a grown son loves and knows his own father.

Now while they were children, that wasn't really what life was like for God's people. Yes, chapter 4, verse 1, they had the promise that one day they'd inherit everything.

But while they were children in one sense, they were no better off than a slave or a servant. They had that promise, but only by faith. And so they lived under their guardians, waiting to come of age, waiting for the date set by the father when they could inherit.

And Jesus coming into the world, his payment of the Lord's curse, his defeat of death, his resurrection into a new creation, that marked what Paul calls the fullness of time, the end of one age, this present evil age, the age of the flesh, and the opening of the age to come.

[22 : 41] it marked the day when God's children actually inherited what they were promised. And the heart of that privilege, that inheritance, was being given Jesus' spirit, the spirit of a resurrected, new creation man.

coming of age meant being given a real spiritual link to that world to come, a link which up until that point, Israel only had on trust.

The day God's church grew up, verse 6, they inherited the spirit of God's own son, resurrected son, so that just as certainly as Jesus can call God his father, so can we.

Christ might be the prince and you the beggar, but God gives you every single privilege of a legitimate child. That's what adoption into Jesus' family means, the rights to everything Israel was ever promised.

Now all of that has two consequences so massive that it's hard to overstate how much they affect the Christian life. And really, these are why Paul writes, all this theology to his troubled church.

[24 : 02] One is for our relationship with each other and the other is for our own security before God. And the first one comes up in verse 26.

Now that the church has come of age, there's no such thing as Jewishness. For in Christ, in his spirit, you're all sons of God through faith.

All of you have Israel's great privilege. All of you, if you trust Jesus, verse 29, are heirs, inheritors of everything Abraham was promised.

Now those of you who speak Oujia are at a bit of an advantage here because like Greek, Klaswegian is one of those great sophisticated languages with a plural form of the word you. And you need that really to understand the force of this.

That word you is a plural all the way through. It's a yous. So read verse 28 like my Greek tutor, Pastor McCutcheon. There is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free person because yous, plural, are all one.

[25 : 11] And if yous are Christ, then yous, plural, are Abraham's one kind of offspring, his one kind of seed. Do you see that? All of you are one and all of you are Israelites.

So don't go priding yourself today on your Jewishness because to separate yourself like that now would be to miss Israel's Messiah.

These brothers and sisters are bound to Jesus by the very same cord that holds you to him. Don't go priding yourself on how evangelical you are or how wealthy you are or how educated you are. Don't waste your time like everyone on Twitter up to your necks in gender politics and class warfare and cultural snobbery. Don't do it. All of that is to be obsessed with utterly trivial identities, dividing lines that pale into insignificance.

Now that you've put on Christ, he's your identity. And so that great curfew, the rules which kept Israel apart from the other nations until he came, that's given way to the great commission.

[26 : 29] There's implication number one. And the second comes down in verse six. Because Christ has come in history, we now relate to God in a much greater way, a whole different way.

We relate as grown sons. And friends, that means that on your good days or on your bad days, you stand before God with all the confidence and trust of a son standing before his loving father with the spirit of God's own son crying out from your heart, witnessing to God and to you that you belong in this family.

Now why was that so important for these Galatians to hear? Well, think about why a grown man might still long for his childhood. Why were these Galatians pining for the nursery days?

Under Israel's law. Surely it's because they knew all too well about their sinfulness and they were longing for security. They want religion to make them feel safe, feel accepted.

Isn't that how people talk about going to church and saying their prayers and all that sort of thing? I find it such a great comfort to me, they'll say. Insecurity is the root of religiosity.

[27 : 58] It's what made Christians in Galatia pretend and compete with one another and put on all those damaging religious shows. We long for the nursery of religion because we long to feel secure.

But actually that is a horrible, vicious cycle because now that Christ has come there is no security in Israel's religion. Moses has done his job.

And if you look for reassurance and all that now, his law can only condemn you. So the more we look for reassurance in our own performance, going to church, saying the right things, looking the part, the more crushed and condemned we feel and the more desperate we become to put on a show.

It's a horrible cycle. So the answer to that Galatian problem is for us to enjoy what it means to be God's sons. I'm a son because Christ was as entirely legitimate as it is possible to be and I am bound to him.

I'm a son because whether I'm male or female, I am bound to the perfect son, the firstborn. I'm a son because I know that in my heart I cry out to God as my father, not just a master or an Allah, but a father.

[29 : 29] And so however unlikely it seems when I look at my own life, verse 6 tells me that I must belong to him. I'm a son not just because I know God, verse 9, not because I did something, but because he knows me, because he set his fatherly heart on having me as a child.

And so I don't need to put on a performance, do I? I don't need to win him and impress him and compete with my brothers and sisters. That's not how a grown son relates to his dad.

Think about how insulted you'd feel as a father if your son thought of you like that. Surely there's one thing any parent longs for if they've adopted a child.

One thing they want for that child more than anything is just to feel like they belong, isn't it? To feel part of the family, not to ever have to question it again. So what an insult to God's fatherhood it would be, verse 9, to go back to those weak and worthless childish ways of pleasing him.

They thought that religion looked more grown up, didn't they? More mature. So they started observing the Jewish calendar and the holy days and the festivals.

[30 : 51] Won't daddy be impressed? But actually they're acting just like my kids when they get into their mum's makeup. It feels grown up, but it looks utterly babyish.

all those ways of worship, they were tied to this world, the old age. Literally, in the case of the calendar, they're tied to the sun and the moon and the stars.

Just as up in verse 3, when he talks about Israel's childhood, he says they were enslaved to the same things, the basic principles of this world, baby things.

Israel had little physical pictures to rely on while they waited for the promise. A tabernacle, a sacrifice, a priest. But all those things belong to the old age.

And to go back to that stuff now, to base a relationship on God with those little pictures now, that would be like tearing up your adoption papers. See, do you see what Paul's saying in verse 8?

[31 : 54] If you try to please God that way, it's as if you still don't know him at all. It's pagan. All that Israel's religion can win for you now is a marriage stuck with the father-in-law.

When there is so much joy and love and confidence to be found in Jesus, Israel's Messiah, you don't need that now, do you?

Well, before we close our Bibles tonight, please, friends, let's learn to enjoy what it means to be a son. We don't need to put on a show, do we? Do you ever feel like that at church?

Like, from the moment you get through the door, there's an act you have to put on, a face, a smile, a performance. Often we do that, don't we? But it means that we're not really thinking like sons.

This is home, this is family. It's surely the one place in the world that we can be ourselves. So just look how beautiful Paul's answer is to all that insecurity and childish performance.

[33 : 07] His answer is, God the Trinity is to come to the Son, to cry in the Spirit, and to be known by the Father.

To come to Jesus, the Son, is to come of age. It's he who that whole glorious ancient history of Israel was all about. So you could spend years reading Christian books and studying your Bible and praying to Israel's God, but if you've missed Jesus, you've missed it all.

Following him, rejoicing in him, is what it's all been about. Otherwise, you've got a marriage without the bridegroom. To cry in the Spirit, that's to know that you belong.

that you have a Father in heaven and a place in his home. And when you are conscious of your sin and discouraged by failure, you can hardly believe that's true.

But the fact you call out to a heavenly Father, that tells you that it must be. It means his own Son is crying out from your heart.

[34 : 21] And finally, to be known by the Father. Father, that is the most precious thing of all, isn't it? Because it's the end of all pretending. You're his boy, his heir.

Not because of who you are or what you've done, but because when the fullness of time had come, God sent his only Son to bring you into the family. And because he's a father, friend, nothing is ever going to change his mind.

to enjoy what it means to be his son, says Paul. You don't need the nursery. You don't need religion to comfort you. You don't need to look good in front of others in church to know you belong.

If you are known by the Father and loved in his Son, then you have nothing to prove. Well, let's pray.

Father God, what a privilege we have to address you with those words. And what a cost that word Father came at. And so we pray, dear Father, that knowing we are your sons would shape how we think and how we feel for every minute of every day.

[35 : 39] How we think about you who knew us and loved us before the world began. How we feel about ourselves in whom the spirit of your own Son cries out.

And how we feel about each other, these brothers and sisters with whom we'll share all that you've promised and before whom we never have to pretend.

Thank you, Lord, for making us sons. In Jesus, your only Son. Amen.