

**AT THE RIGHT TIME  
Galatians 3:19-4:31**

**Dr. Howard Batson  
First Baptist Church  
Amarillo, Texas  
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Kay and Randall O'Brien could not remember a more pleasant or leisurely Easter Sunday morning. Randall was pastor at Calvary Baptist Church. Their daughters, Alyson, seven, and Shannon, four, found their beautiful Easter baskets and enjoyed a wonderful egg hunt followed by the family breakfast. Perfect.

The girls got dressed, picture pretty, and posed for snapshots. Finally, Randall O'Brien retired to the shower to get ready for the biggest service in his ten months at Calvary Church.

It was 7:23, almost an hour before the early worship service, when the blood-curdling scream tore through the shower door. What Dr. O'Brien had not heard was the ringing of the telephone. On the line was Milt Loftis, a Calvary deacon and choir member.

Deacon Loftis said good morning to Kay O'Brien and asked about the minister. "Has he left the house yet?" Kay said no, as a matter of fact, her husband was enjoying a shower. Deacon Loftis said it in measured tones: "Kay, did you all forget to set your clocks forward?"

That's when Mrs. O'Brien screamed. There is no point in spelling out the frantic details. The best Randall O'Brien remembers, Kay stuffed his suit through the door while somebody started drying his hair, and somebody else, maybe the preacher himself, began slipping shoes on his feet.

When he finally arrived for the year's biggest service, the choir had been singing one more verse for forty-five minutes.

The minister's parting words to his wife were in the form of a question: "Where would you like to spend next Easter?"

Unlike O'Brien who showed up tardy for the resurrection celebration, Paul asserted that the Messiah, Jesus, arrived at just the right time.

Paul previously demonstrated (3:1-18) that Abraham was considered righteous by God because of his faith and not because of his law-keeping. The law of Moses, which came hundreds of years after Abraham, did not invalidate God's covenant with Abraham. The true children of Abraham are those who are of faith, as Abraham was of faith.

Having elevated God's covenant with Abraham above the receiving of the law, Paul next addressed the question: why, then, does the law exist if it cannot save and if it is secondary to God's covenant of faith with Abraham?

## **The Right Time for the Law (3:19-4:3)**

### *The law as a jailer (3:19-23)*

First, Paul demonstrated that the law served as a jailer. God provided the law “because of transgressions” (Gal 3:19). We were locked up by God’s law. The word used for “locked up” (or “shut up”) described someone who has been hemmed in on all sides and has no opportunity to escape. The law demonstrated that everyone has transgressed the purposes of God and is therefore a captive to sin. All avenues of escape were closed down until the true liberator, the Christ, should come.

### *The law as a tutor (3:24-26)*

Second, Paul said the law served not only as a jailer, but also as a tutor to lead us to Christ (3:24-26). The tutor served wealthy Greek and Roman families by taking care of their children at those times when the children were not at school. The tutor served as a disciplinarian, supervising children from ages 6 to 16. Likewise, the law disciplined the people of God until they were ready to receive salvation by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the tutor (3:25).

Remember, as a Pharisee, Paul had zealously followed the law (Phil 3:6). In doing so, he had not found himself liberated but actually enslaved to evil as he was persecuting God’s anointed and God’s people.

Having made clear the role of the law in helping the Galatians see their entrapment to sin (jailer) and the role of the law as disciplinarian to watch over God’s people until the time of faith (tutor), Paul summarized the liberating result of the coming of the Messiah. Galatians 3:28 contains one of the most profound statements in all of the New Testament. Some New Testament scholars see this section of Galatians as the climax of the entire epistle. Whatever we might believe to be the heartbeat of Paul’s theology, contained among those ideas must be the building of a community of faith which is not based on gender, ethnicity, or social status. Paul was seeking to define the one community of God. In Christ Jesus all barriers have been broken down, and the ground at the cross is level. Baptism into Christ Jesus means that the barriers of race, gender, and social status no longer exclude anyone from the kingdom of God in Christ Jesus.

We must bear in mind, however, that Paul is not declaring that the distinctions have vanished. He, himself, continued to address Jews and Gentiles as ethnic units (Romans 9-11). He also addressed slaves and slave owners and men and women as distinct groups (Ephesians 5:21-6:9). Being in Christ does not mean that distinctions no longer remain. Nonetheless, Paul proclaimed that in Christ Jesus there is no superiority or inferiority. Baptism in Christ makes invalid the discrimination deeply embedded in our culture. Race, gender, and class are neither advantages nor disadvantages in our right standing before God (3:27-29).

In biblical times a pious, Jewish male would daily thank God that he was not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Perhaps Paul even had this well-known prayer in mind as he explained how baptism into Christ had shattered the barriers.

### *The law as a trustee (4:1-3)*

Paul asserted that being in Christ was deliverance from bondage. Paul does not even have to say that the guardian or the trustee represents the law; that much is already clear. Before the coming of the Messiah, the people of God were in the plight of a young heir whose father had died. Such an heir was too young to have access to the family estate. Therefore, until he came of age, the minor had no rights at all. His status, in some ways, was no better than that of a slave. He was under the control of guardians and trustees who managed his affairs and determined his life.

The language in verse 3 is striking. Paul said that we are under bondage to the “elemental things of the world.” This description was probably intended to be broad enough to encompass the principles and practices of both Judaism and paganism. He was equating life under the law with bondage to “the elemental spirits of the universe,” those demonic and powerful forces that control the unseen world and leave us with little freedom to shape the course of our own lives. Perhaps Paul was speaking to the Gentile Christians in the region of Galatia who were forfeiting their freedom and taking on circumcision and the keeping of the religious calendar. To do so, Paul said, is to revert to the old system of being under the control of the elemental spirits.

### **The Right Time for Christ (4:4-20)**

During our first Christmas season in Amarillo, 1995, we soon discovered that our nativity scene was missing its lead character, Baby Jesus. The house was thoroughly searched—under the beds and behind the couch cushions—but despite our seeking Him, the special infant could not be found. The time came to exchange gifts with our daughters on Christmas Day. Ryan, then 4, presented gifts she had prepared, each crudely wrapped with a whole roll of tape. Then Jordan, who was 2, came bearing her gifts for dad and for mom. Unwrapping a small bundle of paper, my wife Lisa discovered that her gift was the missing Baby Jesus. Needless to say, we couldn’t bring ourselves to scold this two-year-old for remaining silent about the missing person’s report that we had put out in our home for the Son of God. While Jesus was almost late for Christmas that year, He was right on time for the very first Christmas. He came “in the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4).

With the phrase “the fullness of time” Paul declared that the central event in God’s dealing with humankind was the sending of His Son. Christ, too, was born of a woman. He, too, was born under the influence of the law. He was born a human being, that is “of a woman,” and born a Jew, that is “under the law.” In order to redeem those under the law, He had to be born under the sphere of the law. He was able to identify with the people of God in every struggle they might encounter. The good news lies not only in the announcement that a baby is born, but also in the assurance that “by putting the chains on himself, He takes them off us.”

### *No longer a slave, but a son (4:4-6)*

Because Christ was born under the law to redeem those under the law (4:4-5), we are no longer slaves but are now the children of God. As we possess the Spirit of His Son, we can call God our Abba, our Father. We have this new intimacy as sons of the Father because of the presence of the Spirit in our lives.

### *The chains back on (4:7-11)*

Paul stood in shocked disbelief that the Galatians would now, once again, submit themselves to the law or any elemental thing. Paul made clear exactly what they were doing that he found objectionable. “You are observing special days, and months, seasons, and years,” (v. 10). He was probably referring to special times of worship and celebration according to the religious calendar of Judaism.

### *A personal appeal (4:12-20)*

Paul began to make a personal appeal in verse 12. He addressed his Galatian hearers directly. We can see that Paul was not arguing as a scholar, but, rather, as a caring pastor. Paul called upon the Galatians to copy his Christian freedom. “Be free like me,” Paul seemed to be saying.

Paul had fond memories about how he had been greeted and treated by the Galatians. They had done him “no wrong” when he visited their cities, proclaiming the gospel of Christ Jesus. In fact, they welcomed him with open arms. Paul was particularly appreciative of their efforts because he was carrying the burden of an illness when he was in Galatia. Many believe this illness was blindness. Thus, Paul said they were so cordial that they would have been willing to give him their own eyes (v. 15). Others have suggested that he was suffering from epilepsy or another malady.

Despite this initial, royal treatment, things had changed. The relationship had soured. Why were they angry at Paul for having told them the truth that the gospel of the apostles is a gospel that sets them free from the law which has enslaved? Paul knew the motives of the Judaizers (vv. 17-18). They wanted to win the Galatians to their perverted, legalistic gospel.

Paul closed with terms of endearment (v. 19). He compared himself to a mother struggling through childbirth. He was willing to endure the hardship of labor until the Galatians had Christ formed within them. He wanted to see them shaped into the image of Christ.

### **The Allegory of Freedom (4:21-31)**

Paul formed an allegory to summarize his point. He mentioned Abraham’s two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, born through Sarah and Hagar, respectively. When Sarah did not bear Abraham a child, she then sought to provide the heir through Hagar, her Egyptian slave. (See Genesis 21.) Ishmael was not the child of promise because he was born according to flesh. No miracle was involved. Isaac was the child of promise. The divine miracle was, of course, that Sarah was far past the time of child-bearing.

For Paul, Hagar and Sarah represented two different covenants. Hagar represented the covenant of the law given on Mount Sinai, and her child, Ishmael, was a slave. Those who continually submit themselves to the Mosaic law correspond to Ishmael. Hagar, therefore, corresponded to the people of Jerusalem in Paul’s time who were enslaved by the law. Sarah, on the other hand, corresponded to the heavenly Jerusalem. Paul reminded them once again that they are children of the promise. They are Sarah’s children.

Mark Upshaw said he probably would have signed with Rhode Island anyway. Still, the former Columbus High School basketball standout was pleased to know Stanford coaches were interested—even if their recruitment letter arrived 21 years late.

The letter, signed by then-Cardinal coach Dick DiBiaso, was dated May, 1978, but didn't arrive at Columbus High until the spring of 1999.

The five-paragraph letter, mostly a sales pitch for Stanford, included a questionnaire and a stamped return envelope.

“Maybe I need to send that in and they'll give me a scholarship,” laughed Upshaw, now a 38-year-old father of two who runs his own business in the Atlanta area.

The letter's envelope has a Stanford, Calif., postmark dated May 5, 1978, overlaid with one from San Francisco, also dated May 1978. A third postmark, from Columbus, is dated April 26, 1999.

David McQuinn, consumer affairs clerk for the U.S. Postal Service in Columbus, said he has no idea where the letter was all those years. But because of its age, he said it most likely was stuck in a cloth pouch used to store mail.

The letter was addressed to Upshaw in care of Larry Oswalt, then the Columbus basketball coach, who was killed in a car accident several years ago. An office worker at the school gave it to Murphy Jenkins, a coach who has stayed in touch with Upshaw.

“I was just stunned when I saw the postmark,” said Jenkins. “I thought somebody was playing a joke. Then I realized, no, this is real. I decided I would open the letter and see what it said.”

Jenkins contacted Upshaw's wife, Debra.

“She said something about a letter from a college,” Upshaw said. “I said, ‘A letter from a college? I know I don't owe any tuition or anything.’ I just found it kind of funny.”

At Rhode Island, Upshaw made the All-Atlantic 10 Conference team in 1981-82 after averaging 16.9 points per game as a junior. A knee injury kept him out the next season, but he played again in 1983-84, averaging 11.7 points per game.

Unlike Upshaw's recruitment letter which arrived more than two decades late, Jesus was born “in the fullness of time.” When the law had served its purposes as jailer, tutor, and trustee, God sent Jesus right on time!

### **Is the Law Still Necessary Today?**

Historically, in God's plan of salvation the law played the important roles of jailer, tutor, and trustee. What function does the law play today? Are the Old Testament laws of any importance to New Testament believers? Consider:

1. Without the law, the New Testament makes little sense. The law still serves as a witness to the salvation that is found in Christ. The law still points us to Christ, as it pointed ancient Israel to Christ.

2. While the church is no longer “under the law,” the law still serves as a moral guide. The law teaches us much about the expectations of the God who gave the law. In fact, the Ten Commandments are taken to an even more challenging level by Jesus in His most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but I say to you, ‘Do not lust.’ You have heard it said, ‘Do not murder,’ but I say to you, ‘Do not be angry’” (Matthew 5:21-22; 27-28; author’s paraphrase).

3. The law is not abolished by Christ, but, rather, fulfilled in Him (Matthew 5:17-18). He meets the law’s stringent requirements on our behalf. He takes the law’s curse in our stead. (Romans 7:4; 8:1-5.)

### **“The Fullness of Time”**

What did it mean for Paul to say that God sent Christ “when the fullness of time came” (Galatians 4:4)? God’s timing is always perfect. While ancient Israel had long awaited the coming of the Messiah, He came by God’s design and timing. We may never understand why God chose that distinct moment in human history to send Jesus. Some speculate that the time was full because of the widespread use of the Greek language, the political calm, the system of Roman roads, and a human hunger for God. Whatever the reasons, Christ undoubtedly was right on time.