

Galatians 4:1-11

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Over the last few years, a vocal group of secular thinkers and writers have emerged who have become known as the New Atheists.

The New Atheists seem to be attacking religion in general, and sometimes Christianity in particular, publishing books with titles like *God is Not Great*, *How Religion Poisons Everything*, *The God Delusion*, and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which books stated goal was to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms.

Some of the New Atheists' criticisms of religion are the following. Religion causes wars. Religion makes people arrogant and manipulative. Religion prevents people from truly enjoying life.

Religion hinders people from growing up and thinking maturely like an adult. Religion divides people from one another. In short, religion enslaves people.

Now, none of these criticisms of religion are actually new. You can find them in many older writings. They've been discussed for a long time. And if you talk to people who grew up in some kind of religious tradition, but have since backed away from it, many of them would say a similar thing.

[1 : 19] They left the church or they left their religion because it felt like bondage. Now, several Christian scholars have responded to the New Atheists by writing books in order to counter many of their claims.

But today, in the passage that we're looking at in the book of Galatians, we'll see that the Apostle Paul actually agrees with the New Atheists on at least one point.

that religion can be, and very often has been, an enslaving force in the world. So turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Galatians.

We're looking at Galatians chapter 4, verses 1 through 11. It's found on page 974 in the Pew Bibles. So if you can turn there and read along with me.

Amen. Amen. And Paul writes this. 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 : 27] But he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way, we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of 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.

And if a son, then an heir through God. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are 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. The first thing that Paul says in this passage is that spiritually speaking, all of us were born into a state of bondage or slavery.

[3 : 51] Now, in the church that he was writing to, the Christian church in Galatia, there were basically two groups of people. There were Christians from a Jewish background, religious insiders who had grown up under the Jewish law, who knew the Old Testament scriptures, and who had been taught those from a young age.

And then there were Christians from a Gentile background, religious outsiders who had never read the Bible. Many of them worshiped pagan idols, and they were known for engaging in all kinds of licentious and immoral behavior.

Now, the striking thing is, Paul describes the spiritual state of these two groups of people in exactly the same terms. They were both in slavery.

In verse 8, Paul refers primarily to the Gentiles. He said, formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature were not gods. In other words, you worshiped idols. You were in bondage to superstitions, false beliefs, immoral behaviors, what Paul will later call works of the flesh.

But in verses 1 through 3, Paul speaks primarily of the Jewish people living under the Old Testament law. And he says that they were also under a form of bondage.

[5 : 03] He uses the analogy of a child who is an heir. So think of a child in the British royal family. Or even Prince Charles, the current heir to the throne, even though he's much older.

He's in line to one day become the king of England. But until Queen Elizabeth steps down or dies, he has no authority over the realm of England.

Or think of Bill Gates' oldest daughter, Jennifer. She's 16 years old. She's in line to receive an inheritance from the wealthiest man in the world. The second wealthiest man in the world. But right now, she's just a high school student.

Now, of course, her parents are probably providing amply for her. But as a minor, she is not free to spend her inheritance as she pleases. She's still under the authority of her parents.

And in the ancient world, wealthy families would often hire guardians and managers to supervise their children and manage their property until they reached a certain age.

[6 : 01] And Paul has already used this analogy of a guardian to describe the people of Israel under the Old Testament law. The law was like a guardian. And as long as they were under this law, they weren't yet free.

They were still in a form of bondage. The people of Israel in the Old Testament had received amazing promises from God. If you read the Old Testament, if you read God's promises, they're amazing promises.

You will be my people and I will be your God. In you, God says to Abraham, in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed. I will make you as a light to the nations, Isaiah says.

God says to Abraham, all the land that you see, all this land of Canaan, I will give to you and to your offspring. But when you read the story of the Old Testament, you don't see these promises gloriously fulfilled.

Rather, over and over, you see a story of failure and disappointment. In Exodus, God gives the people the law in smoke and fire at Mount Sinai, and then they turn right around and build a golden calf and start worshiping this golden calf.

[7 : 09] In Joshua, the people of Israel enter the promised land, but then in Judges, they become just as bad or worse as the people who formerly occupied it. In Samuel, you see David, who's raised up as a king of Israel, the man after God's own heart.

But then in the book of Kings, after David's son Solomon dies, the kingdom is divided in two, and it's never reunited. And almost all the later kings are unfaithful to God, and ultimately, the people are so persistently disobedient that they get thrown out of the land, they get exiled.

In Ezra, Nehemiah, they finally come home from exile, and then they start going back to their old ways. They were not free to be all that God had made and called them to be.

In verse 3 and verse 9, Paul uses the same phrase. He says, we were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. The Jewish religious people and the Gentiles as well.

You might ask, what exactly does that phrase mean? Elementary principles of the world, enslavement to them. What does that phrase mean? Well, the phrase can mean different things in different contexts. So sometimes the phrase can refer to basic or elementary principles, sort of like learning the ABCs in kindergarten.

[8 : 31] You know, once you learn the ABCs in kindergarten, you don't go through the rest of grade school singing the ABC song every single year. Because you learn the ABCs, you can go on to reading and writing, to actual interesting things.

You know, if you just kept learning the ABCs all over again every single year, that would be boring. It would be pointless. And this is sort of what Paul's saying with the law. The law is like learning the alphabet.

You have to learn it. And nothing makes sense without it. But you can't stop there. Otherwise, your religion will be boring and pointless. So that's one possible meaning of the phrase.

However, it doesn't quite explain why Paul says they were in slavery to these elementary principles. Now, in other contexts, the elementary principles of the world can refer to the physical elements which make up the world.

Or even the spiritual forces which were thought to govern the world. As the text note at the bottom of the page, it says it can also be translated elemental spirits.

[9 : 33] Sort of a phrase with a slightly ominous feel. And already, in Galatians chapter 1 verse 4, Paul has described the world in which we live as this present evil age.

In other words, there are systems of oppression which are bigger than any one individual. There is structural injustice as well as personal sin. And even beyond that, Paul says that there are real spiritual forces of evil that confuse and deceive and hold people in bondage.

So even the law, which was originally given by God for a good purpose, has been twisted so often into an instrument of manipulation or control or despair.

So Paul says, religious or not, all of us were born into a state of bondage, spiritual bondage or slavery.

We're not free in ourselves to be all that God has made and called us to be. But the good news that Paul comes to bring is that Jesus didn't come to make us slaves.

[10 : 38] Jesus came to set us free. Verse 4 and 5 says, God sent forth his son in the fullness of time, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who are under the law.

And that word redeem means to buy someone out of slavery. To pay the price in order to set them free. Again, this concept has roots in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel had been in slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt.

And God sent Moses to redeem them, to bring them out. Moses was born of Hebrew parents, born under bondage, born with the threat of death over his life. And yet, God raised him up to redeem his people who are under bondage.

And it wasn't easy. Moses had to confront Pharaoh, the enemy of God's people, ten times. He had to deal with rejection and unbelief from his fellow Israelites, the people that he was trying to help.

And finally, he had to lead them through seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Like the Red Sea, with the Egyptian army coming right behind them. But when God led them through the Red Sea, and when they came out on the other side, he led the people in a song of victory.

[11 : 52] He said, I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The Lord is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation. You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed.

And yet, the exodus from Egypt, as great a redemption as it was, to bring the whole nation of Israel out of bondage into freedom, would pale in comparison to the redemption that Jesus came to accomplish.

Paul says, in the fullness of time, Jesus was born of a woman. Born under the law. And unlike anyone else, Jesus perfectly fulfilled all the requirements of God's law.

You know, Moses faced a difficult task. But the task that Jesus faced was far more difficult. Jesus faced not only unbelief from his own disciples, not only opposition and threats from the religious leaders and from the Roman authorities, but throughout his life he faced the temptations of Satan himself, the accuser and deceiver of God's people.

And yet, even to his dying breath on the cross, Jesus remained perfectly faithful, saying, Father, your will be done. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

[13 : 19] And Jesus did all this in order to redeem us, to set us, to pay the price, to set us free from sin and the law.

Martin Luther writes, Jesus Christ did not come to make a new law, but to feel and suffer the terrors of the law and to overcome it that he might completely abolish it.

He was not a teacher of the law, but an obedient disciple of the law, that by his obedience he might redeem those who are under the law. So Paul's saying if you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you've been redeemed.

You've been bought out of slavery. You're free from the burden and the curse of the law. You're free from condemnation, free from the enslaving power of sin, free to be all that God has made and called you to be.

There's a glorious freedom in Jesus. If you experienced that glorious freedom. Harriet Tubman was born as a slave, and as a child she was beaten by masters to whom she was hired out.

[14 : 26] But at the age of 29, she escaped to Pennsylvania. And over the course of her life, she personally guided her own family and over 60 other slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad.

She was even nicknamed Moses, and it was said of her she never lost a passenger. But in her, she described the moment when she first crossed the Mason-Dixon line, when she first crossed from a slave state into a free state.

And she says, When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything.

The sun came like gold through the trees and over the fields. I felt like I was in heaven. If Jesus has redeemed you, if he has brought you from death to life, from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, it is a glorious freedom.

In him you are a new creation, and all things can become new. So Jesus came to redeem us. But not only that, not only did Jesus come to free us from slavery, he also came to free us for something better.

[15 : 39] He came to free us so that we could be adopted as God's children, to belong to God as his child forever. See, Paul uses these two metaphors, redemption and adoption, to describe what Jesus has done for us.

And they're meant to be understood together. You can't separate them from each other. Verse 5 says, Jesus came to redeem those under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.

And just like redemption, this idea of adoption also has roots in the Old Testament. So in Exodus chapter 4, verse 22, God tells Moses to say to Pharaoh, thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son.

And I say to you, let my son go so that he may serve me. In other words, God adopted the people of Israel as his son. And throughout the Old Testament, God speaks to the people of Israel as a child.

So in Hosea 11, it says, When Israel was a child, I loved him. And out of Egypt, I called my son. But Israel was unfaithful.

[16 : 54] The more I called to them, the more they went away. They kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. And yet God goes on to say, But it was I who taught them to walk.

I took them up by their arms. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love. I bent down to them and fed them. You see in the Old Testament, God's tender love for his son, for his people, for his child, for his child, Israel.

And yet while God does speak of Israel corporately as his son, God does not speak of the individual believers in the Old Testament as God's sons and daughters.

Only the king of Israel, representing the entire nation, is described in the Old Testament as God's son. And so when Jesus came on the scene, when Jesus began teaching, one of the most striking aspects of his teaching and his prayer was that Jesus called God my Father.

No one else had done this. This was unprecedented. We read earlier from Luke where Jesus says, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. He says, All things have been handed over to me by my Father.

[18 : 15] Jesus claimed to have a special and unique and intimate and eternal relationship with God the Father. Jesus claimed to be the promised king in the line of David.

The perfect embodiment of all that Israel had been called to be and to do. God's faithful son. And yet Jesus taught his disciples that we too can come before God and address him as our Father.

That we can share in the status of sonship before God. So after Jesus was raised from the dead, he said to Mary, he said, Go to my brothers and say to them, I'm ascending to my Father and your Father.

To my God and your God. John 20, 17. See, according to the Bible, all people, every person, is made in the image of God. But no one is a natural born child of God.

Jesus is God's only son by nature. Jesus is God's eternally begotten son. His only son by nature. But through Jesus, we can be adopted and included in God's family by God's gracious choice.

[19 : 37] See, every one of us here who believes in Jesus is an adopted child of God. You know, sometimes in the church there can be sort of a division between the people who grew up and were born and raised in the church and sort of know everything and have been there all their lives and might feel like we should run the place.

And then the people who've come in sort of later on. You know, who've figured it out later on in life. But this passage says no. This passage says none of us are natural born children of God.

All of us have been adopted into God's family. We're all on the same level here. See, in the Roman world, if a wealthy man did not have a son, he sometimes would choose to adopt an heir so that he would have someone to pass on his inheritance to.

But you know, God didn't adopt us because he lacked a son. God didn't adopt us because he was lonely or bored or because he needed anything.

God didn't adopt us because we add something to him that he didn't have already. God had everything he could want. In the eternal fellowship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, God has been, always was, is, and will be perfectly complete.

[21 : 03] And yet, out of that overflowing love, God the Father adopted us into his family through Jesus the Son and by the Spirit.

Notice how the whole Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all involved in this. Verse 4 says, God sent forth his Son. And verse 6 says, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts so that we might cry, Abba, Father.

So we see the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit perfectly complete yet working together for our redemption, for our adoption to bring us into the very life of God himself.

Now some of you may be wondering, well there's lots of talk here about sons, what about daughters? Is Paul a chauvinist like all the other people in his culture?

Well the Roman culture was quite chauvinistic and in fact in Roman culture daughters had no legal rights to inheritance. And now in ancient Israel it was different.

[22 : 09] Daughters did have legal rights to inheritance under the Old Testament law. But under Roman law they didn't. And so when Paul says you're all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, what he's saying is that all Christians, male and female alike, fully inherit the promises of God in Jesus.

In the Old Testament only men could be circumcised, could receive that covenant sign. But in the New Testament we see both men and women being baptized as a sign of belonging to Jesus.

All of us are clothed with Christ, filled with his spirit, full inheritors of his eternal kingdom, fully accepted as members of his family simply by trusting in Jesus.

holiness. So let me ask, are you relating to God in this way? Do you relate to God as a child to a father? Several years ago I was in Washington, D.C.

and I saw the President of the United States in person. I was visiting a congressman in the Capitol building. We were standing at the top of a stairway and President Clinton happened to be passing by in the hallway below and he waved to us.

[23 : 20] I saw him for about three seconds and that's probably the closest that I will ever get to a U.S. President because for good reasons there are all kinds of barriers to prevent people from getting near the President and even more barriers to prevent people from actually talking with him or touching him.

And if this is the case with the President of the United States how much more so with the ruler of the entire universe with the holy and righteous God who dwells in unapproachable light whom no one has ever seen or can see.

You know in the Old Testament God promised that he would come and dwell with his people in the temple in Jerusalem. But you know if you walk up to the temple you see a big wall and if you go inside that wall see if you're a Gentile you had to stay in the outer court so you'd see a big wall but if you were a Jewish man or woman you could go inside that wall and then you'd see another wall and only Jewish men could go by that next wall and then you'd see another wall and only priests could go past that wall and then you'd see another wall.

into the holy of holies the very presence of God and only one person could go inside that final wall only the high priest and only once a year and only with a sacrifice there were all these barriers representing that God is pure and holy and we are not and we cannot come directly into his presence but when Jesus Christ died on the cross the curtain in the temple was torn in two the barriers were broken down and the way of access to God was opened through Jesus because Jesus is the temple and so Jews and Gentiles men and women young and old can freely come into the very presence of God through Jesus because Jesus broke down the walls it's sort of like if you were the president's daughter living in the

White House knowing that you could go up to your dad without a security clearance without going through a metal detector without an escort without an appointment simply because you're his child and this is the confidence and freedom that we can have in approaching God as our father through Jesus Christ that we that he is our father and we are his children that he has adopted us and included us in his family you know one of the most delightful moments of my day is when I come home from work and it's not because I don't like being here being here at work but it's because when I come home and I open the front door and our 19 month old son Nathan says Papa and he runs back and forth and he squeals with excitement and sometimes he runs up to me and gives me a hug if I say hug he'll run up and give me a hug you know he doesn't he's not worried about what anyone else thinks he knows he has freedom and confidence to approach me and to cry out in a loud voice and he knows that I will hear him because I'm his dad and this is the confidence that you and I can have in approaching our heavenly father that we are known and loved by him so regardless of what your dad on earth was like or even if you ever knew your dad you have a dad in heaven who knows you and loves you and delights in you and he has adopted you through Jesus Christ and he's placed his spirit in you so that you can cry out to him and say

[27 : 44] Abba father verse 9 Paul says you've come to know God or rather you're known by God you know in the Bible knowing doesn't just mean having information about someone someone it involves personal engagement and participation so to be known by God doesn't just mean God sees you from far off and knows everything about you but to be truly known by God means that he's intimately involved with you that he knows you from the inside out like an attentive parent knows their child like a loving husband knows his wife because we are known by God we can know God because we're loved by God we can love him in return a few years after settling in Burma the American missionary Adoniram Judson met a Burmese intellectual named Mang Shui Nyong he was a teacher scholar and a skeptic and he often visited Adoniram and listened to his teaching about Jesus and the Bible and he asked a seemingly unending stream of philosophical questions finally one day he said

I can believe in Christianity except for one thing I cannot believe that Jesus was crucified that he died such a shameful form of death and Adoniram said a true disciple does not ask whether a fact agrees with his own reason but whether it is in the book his pride has yielded to the divine testimony break down your pride and yield to the word of God and Mang Shui Nyong responded as you say these words I see my error I have been trusting ultimately in my own reason I now believe that Christ was crucified because it is contained in the scripture now later that night the conversation continued and they were speaking about the uncertainty of life and Mang Shui Nyong said I think that even if I should die suddenly I would not be lost Adoniram said why he said because I love Jesus Christ

Adoniram said do you really love him and with deep feeling Mang Shui Nyong replied no one who really knows him can help loving him have you come to know God through Jesus Christ have you experienced his redeeming adopting grace that draws you to know and love him in return that makes you no longer a slave who lives merely out of duty and fear but a child who responds with love and gratitude you know maybe you're here today and maybe you don't believe in Christianity or maybe you're not sure that any of this stuff is true but wouldn't you want that kind of relationship with God if it were true and real and available read the New Testament Gospels consider the words of Jesus consider the person of Jesus talk to Christians who've experienced this reality of being known and loved being redeemed and adopted in

Jesus Christ and as you read Jesus words you may find that they start to read you as you seek to know the truth about God you may get a sense that this God knows you even more than you know him or maybe you've been around the church for a while maybe you don't have any particular objections to Christian teachings but you've never experienced that joy of being redeemed the security of being adopted by Christ and so if you think about where do you find joy and security in your life you might think about your family you might think about your career you might think about money or music or sports or books or friends or activities but you're not really finding that in Jesus you find it you look for it in all sorts of other places and if that's you don't miss out don't just hang around the church week after week month after month year after year and miss

Jesus turn to him trust him Jesus promised that God the Father would give the Holy Spirit to all who ask him so ask and keep asking and more and more you will receive maybe you have come to know God through Jesus Christ you have experienced that redeeming and adopting grace and you know not every day is full of sweetness and light some days are hard and dark sometimes we lose sight of the freedom and the joy and the security that belong to us through Jesus but Paul says keep looking to Jesus don't latch on to anything else except him the end of our passage verses 9 through 11 is a warning from Paul to the Christians in Galatia it's a warning against going back to a religious form of slavery to religious formalism he says don't go back to days and months and seasons and years you might think well why would

[33 : 41] Paul of all things why would Paul warn the Galatians against observing religious holidays in Romans 14 Paul says it's fine to observe special days as long as you do it to honor Jesus but the problem is the form can so easily replace take become a replacement for the reality and Colossians 2 says that all the festivals and all the Sabbaths in the Old Testament were merely a shadow of the things to come but the reality is found in Christ and so the false teachers in Galatia were saying you need to get circumcised you need to eat only certain foods you need to keep the Sabbath you need to observe all these holidays in order to be on our level in order to be right with God and Paul says no all of those things were simply meant as signs pointing forward to Jesus and if you've got Jesus you've got all that they were ever meant to point you to in the first place so don't let your religion be defined by forms whether it's a religious calendar or a certain style of music or a certain form of liturgy or lack thereof don't let your trust in Christ degenerate into a long list of rules don't go back to slavery but instead look forward to the freedom that God promises look back to what Christ has already done to redeem and adopt you and look forward to the completion of those things because it only gets better in the future

Romans 8 says you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear but you've received the spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry Abba Father and we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons the redemption of our bodies see in Christ we have been redeemed and adopted but one day we'll experience those things on a whole new level not just freedom from guilt and the enslaving power of sin but freedom from sin and darkness itself when we and all the world will be made new when Jesus returns and on that day we will not only have the Holy Spirit living in us and assuring us and comforting us and enabling us to cry out to God as our Father but we will see God face to face we will dwell in his love and glory forever you're not a slave you're a child and look forward to the fulfillment of that reality let's pray our Father thank you for redeeming and adopting us through your Son

Jesus Christ and by the power of your Spirit Lord thank you for your Spirit who dwells in us who prompts us and enables us to call out to you Abba Father we pray that we might live in the joy and the security that you've given us in Christ we pray in his name Amen Amen You you you