

Galatians 3:23

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[0 : 00] What difference does the birth of Jesus Christ make anyway? Answering that question that the letter to the Galatians might not be the first place you think to go to in the Bible.

You'd probably go to Luke's Gospel wouldn't you or Matthew's Gospel in the New Testament and they would be good places to go to if you wanted to find out about the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas time.

But the Apostle Paul here gives us an alternative to the famous nativity accounts that we know so well. This is Paul's take on the birth of Jesus Christ.

He pulls back the theological curtains on the nativity scene and the reason why the birth in Bethlehem was so significant, just picture it for a moment.

The smelly animals and the baby crying, the chaos and the muck of the cattle shed. It sounds like a prison cell, doesn't it? Unless it felt like that for the Son of God.

[1 : 06] To willingly contract himself down into a seven or eight pound baby. Into the custody of a human body. The restriction and the captivity of that.

But the Apostle Paul thinks of that rather than as a day of captivity, as a day of release. As a day of freedom. As a day of emancipation for all of humanity.

And listen to the words that he uses to describe life, the situation, before the first Christmas. He uses words like captive in verse 23.

Imprisoned. Under a guardian or a warden. In that moment where the Son of God, the eternal Son of God, took on human flesh.

He added to him the restriction of a human body becoming contracted. He is in custody. And yet we are somehow released.

[2 : 20] And it's so true, isn't it? With presents, the best ones are the ones that you don't think to ask for. And if someone knows you really, really well, they can get you a present like that, can't they?

Without you giving them your Amazon wish list. When you don't just say, how did you know it's always what I wanted? But actually, how did you know when I didn't even know it's what I always wanted?

And Paul shows us here that that is what happened at Christmas time. God sent a gift. The gift of Jesus. The gift that we didn't even know we needed ourselves.

Because first off, he says, before Jesus came, number one, we were imprisoned. We were imprisoned. Just look at verse 23.

Now, before faith came, we were held captive under the law. Imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. The birth of Jesus Christ makes a difference because before it happened, Paul says, we were held captive.

[3 : 27] Before Jesus arrived, we lived behind bars. In an invisible prison. With walls and a floor and a ceiling.

And we couldn't see that prison physically around us. But it was a prison that was real and it kept us from being free. Really free. It made us feel a kind of bondage.

And a restriction. He says, we were held captive under the law. Let me give you a bit of background on that letter to the Galatians that we're reading today.

We've jumped in halfway through, haven't we? We've kind of jumped in a bit cold, really. Paul writes this letter to a group of churches who are a mixture of Jewish converts to Christianity and non-Jews. And Galatians is one of the most brutal letters that Paul writes to a group of Christians. Things are pretty dire. Earlier in the letter, he says, you've departed from the true gospel to a different false message.

[4 : 35] And there are some among them who want to distort the good news of Jesus. They particularly want to add some Jewish practices.

They want to keep some Old Testament Bible laws like circumcision and like certain religious Jewish days. And that is what Paul means when he talks about the law here.

But he says to them, why would you want to add those laws onto the wonderful message about Jesus? That is bizarre behaviour. And one reason for that is that the law was designed not to set you free, but partly as a prison.

The law was designed and given to you to keep you in a cell. He says, verse 23, it held us captive. You could use that word captive to describe the kind of time before a person is kind of judged and sentenced in court.

[5 : 44] It's like being held in a holding cell in a local police station. They're kept in police custody or by the court authorities.

Kept until a further day when proceedings can go further. That is the kind of thing that's going on here. So if you open up the Old Testament and you go to the books of the law, Leviticus and Deuteronomy and in other places, you can see that law in all of its glorious detail, keeping the festivals and the feasts, making sacrifices, giving free will offerings, giving offerings, giving compulsory offerings, having ceremonial washings, wearing certain types of clothing, not wearing this kind of clothing, cutting your hair in a certain way, not cutting your hair in that way, eating certain foods, not eating those foods, and on and on and on.

There was so much that you had to do as an Old Testament Jew. And part of, not all of it, but part of the design of the law, Paul says, was to make you realise that you are trapped.

Clean your house in a certain way. Not in this way, but in this way. Bake bread in a certain way, not with yeast, this way. Using utensils for this and not for that.

Dealing with skin diseases. Where to go to the toilet. Not here, but over here. All the fine details of ceremonies and the days and the practices were given by God, and they were good, but at the same time, they were to make God's people feel like they were scratching off the days in the prison cell.

[7 : 35] They were constructed to give them longing for a freedom that they didn't have. A freedom that they knew they couldn't get for themselves.

It was, wasn't it, the prison of perfection. Keep this good and holy law, and all of these laws, and you must keep all of it to be pleasing to God.

I don't know if you've worn virtual reality goggles ever. They're really weird. I don't know if you've tried it. I did it once in a doctor's surgery. He was looking at my spine, with issues with that, and then you kind of go in the room, and it was a chiropractor, and it was a bit of a grotty room, to be honest.

Kind of dark and a bit dingy, with a little kind of old chair in the corner. But he put this virtual reality headset on me, and the room transformed.

It was amazing. Everything was clean. There was a plant pot with flowers in the corner. And then he suddenly brought this projection of my own body.

[8 : 48] where you could see the spine. And I was like, who is this guy? He is incredible. He has got a six-pack and pecs.

And then you take off the goggles. And you remember where you are, and exactly who you are again. And the law functioned like that.

The law told you, get real with yourself, and take off the goggles. The law showed them who they really were, and where they really were.

The reality is, it said to them, you are in a prison of your own inability to be right with God. It was a prison that taught God's people that life, and freedom, and holiness cannot be done ultimately in these things for you.

By your own efforts. So the law, part of it, made them unsatisfied. Perfection is required. The prison told them, nobody's perfect.

[10 : 01] And it was to drive them away from themselves, and towards God, to help them. It was to drive them towards faith, Paul says.

Verse 24. The law was a guardian, and not in a positive sense there. The word is more like a warden. The law drove them to faith in God, as the one who makes us right with him.

The law wasn't given so that they could earn friendship with God, but precisely to show them that they couldn't do that. But they had to trust. They had to have faith in the God who could make it work.

And that is why Paul mentions Abraham in verse 29, because that is exactly what happened with Abraham. That Abraham is the kind of father of the faith, isn't he?

And do you remember the story of Abraham? God asks Abraham, he kind of appears to Abraham, and he asks Abraham to obey him and to trust in him. And we're told in Genesis, Abraham believed God, and that belief was credited, counted as righteousness for Abraham.

[11 : 20] Abraham. And then the law of God's people didn't come for centuries later until the time of Moses. The law wasn't given as the way the people could be made right with God.

It was given afterwards to keep them looking to God in faith, just as Abraham had first done. Verse 25, that they might be justified by faith.

When you die, God will ask you, won't he, why should I let you into heaven? Why should I justify you?

Why should I say you are right with me? Is it by things that you have done in this life? Or is it because you believed I could do it?

I've told this story before of an old monk and a student. And the student asks his master for advice in life. What's the key?

[12 : 26] And the older monk says to the student, go back to your cell and your cell will teach you everything. And the law is like that.

The law is the prison facility that teaches much about ourselves and why we need Jesus. The incessant, scrupulous, detailed, all-pervading laws spoke to them of their inadequacy.

So if you imagine in any way, you might not have grown up with Jewish religion, you might not, this might be the first time you've heard any of this, but if you imagine in any way that you are going to make yourself right with God, if you are good enough to do that, or that you are living a good life and God thinks that is okay and you can be justified, the law says just take off the goggles.

Because it took them an age to realise that that is absolute baloney. by the end of it they were saying, weren't they, I'm a sinner, let me out of here, let me out.

Before Jesus came we were held captive by our own sin and our own inability and the law proved that to us just as surely as a concrete prison would prove that we are held captive.

[13 : 55] So when Jesus was born we were held captive but secondly then faith came to set us free. Faith came to set us free and the story goes of a prison in the US where at twenty past twelve one Saturday morning a glitch in the security system simultaneously unlocked all five hundred cell doors and just imagine the look on the warden's face as he kind of saw that on the CCTV the doors like dominoes swinging open Paul says until Christ came we were under a warden but now faith has come we are no longer under a guardian or a warden but it's not a glitch it is that a child has been born in the prison and the doors swing open Paul says he is in this passage talking about the birth of Jesus

Christ but it's strange how he describes that moment isn't it who came into the world at Christmas Paul look at how he described it verse 25 now faith has come he says it in the same way in verse 23 before faith came we were held captive now we are on the same page here aren't we because verse 24 he elaborates he says until Christ came so we know he's talking about the coming of the Lord Jesus we're on the same page we are talking about the incarnation but why say faith came when Jesus arrived a coming faith that would be revealed is he saying that before Jesus came there was no faith and then suddenly people started to have this faith well of course not that is the point about Abraham isn't it he was the father of faith it started with him he was the first to say I can't do this God but I'll trust in you now what he's saying is that Jesus came as the person and the object that all those with true faith have looked to in the past he is the one he is the object of faith he is what this faith is in so much so that when he arrives faith has found its goal faith has arrived and him as the object of faith until Christmas time was not revealed Paul says revealed means literally discovered there is a sense that before Jesus' birth the object of Abraham's faith as he trusted in God and Moses' faith and David's faith and everyone up until now they trusted in God's promises to make them right with him they believed God and they acted based on what they couldn't see and they were kind of in this dark room and the furniture was all in place they just needed to trust God for them to believe his word and his promises but when

Jesus arrives it's as if the light is switched on in the room and he becomes clear as the one that they've been believing in all along we've been in this prison perfectly designed by God to make us long for God himself to come and deal with our sins and each piece of law is like another bar on the window making us cry out in faith for a saviour for a jailbreaker for one to finally fulfil all these righteous demands and the more we've lived in this prison of perfection the more faith rises and says not me but you God but now the goal of that faith is fleshed out quite literally and Jesus is going to come and glitch the prison doors by coming and living out the law by coming and living as a man being born under the law himself and completing every single element of it and offering the ultimate sacrifice of all sacrifices he will bring complete satisfaction of the law he will bring absolute fulfilment of this law so he comes into the prison he lives life and he dies a death in perfect obedience he lives in the cell and he meets all the requirements of this prison he goes to the mess hall and he lives in solitary confinement and he is in the yard and he is on death row and the warden meets him and there is nothing he can say to accuse

Jesus it is as if the prison is so enamoured with the perfection of this man he is its master and the prison has met its match the builder and finisher of this law and so as he enters the law the walls just kind of feel a bit pointless and a bit redundant and the walls crack and crumble and the whole edifice of the law crows down to him and it breathes a sigh of relief Jesus comes so the warden collects his things puts it in a cardboard box and leaves for good and we don't need him anymore his purpose was to make us long for another and over an age of God's people the prison was made to make the prisoners long for someone in faith who could fulfil it on their behalf and now that someone has come in the flesh and don't get me wrong here because

[20 : 25] I'm not saying that the law of the Old Testament in every respect is to be forgotten I want that to be really clear it continues to be a perfect rule of righteousness for us today but in the sense that the law might be used to earn salvation or as a gruelling demonstration of what is needed to be righteous Paul says elsewhere the law in that sense is now dead to us the walls of our inability and slavery crumble because there is one who has done his time and by doing so he's done all of our time he's busted us out you may have seen a book that came out a few years ago called the year of living big biblically one man's humble quest to follow the bible as literally as possible by AJ Jacobs it's kind of funny but interesting points this guy he basically tries to live his life in

New York City for one year following as many of the rules in the Old Testament that he can find so he tries wearing clothes without mixed fibres in them he avoids certain foods he tries to do the whole thing but in the end he concludes he found it virtually impossible to do it all not least because he was living in 20th century New York but he really actually misunderstands the point of the law anyway it's quite a shame you get to the end of the book he's just not got this he misunderstands the bible if he thinks that this year was living biblically because that was never the purpose of the law living biblically as the title says it is not about the pursuit of following the rules that life acts as a prison this law acts as a prison to tell you you need faith in another and so with the appearance of Jesus in the New Testament and the first Jewish apostles they have to get their heads around it don't they came freedom the freedom to eat sausages wrapped in bacon or the freedom to wear jeans the freedom to eat brioche the freedom to cut your hair if it's not prohibited if it doesn't damage your conscience or somebody else's conscience you are free to do whatever you like free to wear what you like you're free to eat what you like you're not bound by the law you're free from the food regulations you're free from the washing regulations you're free from circumcision praise be you're free from penance you're free from lighting candles and visiting shrines you're free from eating halal food you're free from having to go on pilgrimages or making sacrifices you are totally free from guilt and from punishment from God you're free from constantly rating your own performance this is not a place where we come to perform is it church sometimes we struggle to believe that you are free though to serve and to obey God without dread and fear of punishment the doors of the law as the way of you being right with

God with the God who made you are knocked out and you are free that is the difference that the birth of Jesus makes we were captive then faith came but thirdly then and lastly we are now not slaves but sons in Christ we are now not slaves but sons in Christ now it's not just that we are freed from the law but it's that our status has changed actually look at verse 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith now this is another picture that Paul uses to talk about the Old Testament people of God he'll develop it later in the passage that we'll look at next week in chapter 4 but it's as if they were living like children who lived in a very rich family but earlier before Jesus

appears in their spiritual lives they were no different to anyone else in the household they were like slaves he says chapter 4 verse 1 but now that Christ has come they've kind of come of age in the family because of

Christ they are now sons in the sense that they have entitlement to inheritance he says they verse 28 they've put on Christ it's like putting on a coat isn't it if you think about it clothing does two things if you put on a great big coat in the winter time it covers you up doesn't it and it identifies who you are the kind of clothes you wear identify you so just as a coat or garment envelops you think of a big jacket with sheep's wool inside it kind of envelops you doesn't it he says to them free faith you are now enveloped in Jesus Christ you are united to him they've become members of God's family getting a joint account with him and then clothing identifies who you are too a uniform or a suit or overall says something about who you are doesn't it there is a garment on these believers that identifies them as being with

[26 : 35] Christ and in Christ so that when God looks at you he sees this person who is enveloped in the perfection of Jesus you are identified with him you wear the uniform that he wears and so just as the prison walls crumble around him they collapse around you who have put on Christ and trust in him notice Paul says that this putting on of Christ happens at baptism says verse 27 as many of you have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ I love the Lord's timing with these kind of things of us seeing Emiko being baptized today what happens when someone is baptized it is a kind of dressing up ceremony being baptized is to put on Christ to be enveloped by him and to be identified in him so if you've been baptized this morning imagine yourself with this great garment over you this garment of righteousness you are called a

Christian because you bear Christ he envelops you and identifies you you are in him like a hand in a glove baptism like Paul said it doesn't do this automatically it comes by faith in Jesus the perfect one elsewhere Paul talks about the blessings of being in Christ without talking about baptism but in a very real and in a very profound way the water of baptism says something has happened to you you've been in the wardrobe of Jesus Christ and you've put him on and so baptism marks out the end of this law for you because you are identified with him and in him the jail breaker Dietrich von Hoffer wrote in his book God is in the manger he said life in a prison cell may well be compared to advent one waits hopes and does this that or the other things that are really of no consequence because the door is shut and can only be opened from the outside and he's so right that is what advent is about for the apostle Paul because the night before Christmas and leading up to Christmas every night before Christmas since the first man and woman of faith in this God is a night of waiting waiting for captivity to end in this unknown and unseen prison and if you want to get right with God with religious activity with rituals with ceremony with superstition with special days and with special meals the law says come on then try it you have to do the whole thing if you're going to do it complete the whole law and all of the law but

Paul says to the Galatians come on though just get real take off the goggles it took them an age to realise that far from being a way in the law was a barrier to keep them out and to look for a much better man to complete it in their stead and so that is the difference that Christmas makes to you God comes and he enters into the prison he is wrapped in swaddling cloth that you might be wrapped in Christ faith the object of faith comes and finds its goal in Jesus that you might be clothed as a fellow son and just as we close if all this is new to you let me finish by saying you need God in ways that you do not know just like the best gifts don't limit your experience of God to what you think you can ask of him and realize ask for this freedom that he offers you a gift that you didn't know you needed a freedom to be justified in Christ to be right with God through Christ apart from the law which leads you to him let's pray