

# Exegetical Paper: Galatians 4:1-11

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## Exegetical Idea:

Paul reminds the Galatians that they have become sons of God and warns them against seeking again to be enslaved by establishing the law as a standard of righteousness, in order that they might enjoy God's blessing of adoption.

## Translation:

<sup>1</sup>Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different<sup>1</sup> from a servant, even though he is master over all, <sup>2</sup>but is under guardians and managers until the time set by the father.

<sup>3</sup>Even so, we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elemental forces of the world, <sup>4</sup>but when the fullness of time had come,<sup>2</sup> God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup>that<sup>3</sup> he might redeem those who were under the law that we might received the adoption of sons. <sup>6</sup>And because you are sons, God has sent<sup>4</sup> the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, who cries, Abba," that is, "Father." <sup>7</sup>Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>8</sup>But at that time, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those which by nature are not gods; <sup>9</sup>but because you know God, or rather, are known by God, how can you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements of this world<sup>6</sup> and desire to be slaves once again? <sup>10</sup>You observe days and months and season and years; <sup>11</sup>I am afraid for you lest somehow I have labored for you in vain!

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<sup>1</sup> It seemed more appropriate to render this verb "differ" as an adjectival construction to reflect modern English usage. In keeping with this, the Greek genitive following is expressed in English in an ablative sense.

<sup>2</sup> This Greek aorist is best rendered by an English perfect since Paul is talking about something that happened before something else that he is also talking about, the usual use of the English perfect.

<sup>3</sup> Many translations (NASB being a notable exception) render the ἵνα as "to" to convey the purpose expressed by it. This translator does think the use of "to" has a good English flow, so he has translated it as "that" and believes that the purpose expressed in ἵνα will come through in the context.

<sup>4</sup> This Greek aorist has also been rendered by an English perfect (see note 2, above).

<sup>5</sup> δὲ with the genitive to express agency.

<sup>6</sup> This translator still has a fondness for the KJV's "weak and beggarly elements" because of the vivid image conjured up by the words.

## Outline of Galatians 4:1-11

### Sons Seeking to become Slaves

Exegetical Idea: Paul reminds the Galatians that they have become sons of God and warns them against seeking again to be enslaved by establishing the law as a standard of righteousness, in order that they might enjoy God's blessing of adoption.

- I. God brought the Galatian believers from being slaves to enjoying the full benefits of His adoption. (1-7)
  - A. The image of a child under guardianship, who has no more rights than a slave, represents the Jewish believers before redemption (1-2)
  - B. Before redemption, the Jewish believers, though they thought they were free, were in reality enslaved to the elemental forces of the world in the form of their primitive religion. (3)
  - C. The coming of the Savior was for the purpose of redeeming those who were so enslaved so that they might instead become sons of God with full rights and privileges. (4-5, 7)
  - D. The Spirit of God is given to the believer which testifies of this relationship by crying out to God as Father. (6)
- II. The Galatians, by returning to observing the law, are returning to the bondage from which they were redeemed by the Father. (8-11)
  - A. Their enslavement was the result of their ignorance of God, the opposite of the knowledge they now have of God. (8)
  - B. Once one has been set free from bondage, it is foolish to return, but this is what they have done in seeking to return to the law and its observances. (9-11)
    1. Their standing with God now is not the result of their burgeoning knowledge of God, but rather the result of God's knowing them. (9-10)
    2. Paul is exasperated because he has preached the Gospel clearly to them and yet, it seems, that after all his labor they still refuse to believe. (11)

**Commentary:**

*Exegetical Idea:* Paul reminds the Galatians that they have become sons of God and warns them against seeking again to be enslaved by establishing the law as a standard of righteousness, in order that they might enjoy God's blessing of adoption.

*Introduction:*

In chapter 3 of Galatians, Paul has defended the doctrine of justification by faith alone in several ways, by pointing out the work of the Spirit in response to faith, as opposed to the works of the law, in bringing righteousness (3:1-9), by demonstrating that the law brings a curse on those who follow it by pointing out their lack of inherent righteousness (3:10-14, 19-25), and by reminding the Galatians that the promise of life is one that is inherited through Christ, who is the true heir of God, in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, rather than earned through the law (3:15-18, 26-29). In chapter 4, Paul will build on this foundation by pointing out not only the bondage that is inherent in law-keeping as a way of righteousness but also the blessing of being an heir of God, before encouraging them to live in their liberty as children of God by walking in the Spirit.

*I. God brought the Galatian believers from being slaves to enjoying the full benefits of His adoption. (1-7)*

This opening paragraph of chapter 4 follows closely upon the closing verses of chapter 3 in which Paul introduces directly the concept of the believer's adoption. Paul has explained that the believer is an heir of God and now explains the difference between being an heir and being a mere servant.

*I.A. The image of a child under guardianship, who has no more rights than a slave, represents the Jewish believers before redemption (1-2)*

Paul wants the Galatian believers to understand their relationship to the law, so in vv. 1-2, he explains their previous relationship to the law before Christ came. They were no different

from sons in a household before coming into their rights as heirs. In the Gentile customs of the Greeks and the Romans, a son did not come into his own until a certain time, eighteen under Greek custom, a “time set by the father” under Roman custom. A young man in such a situation was “master over all” in that he would one day inherit the entire estate, but until such a day, he had no control over his own affairs. He had no liberty but was instead under the care and direction of “guardians and managers,” those who brought the boy up and those who managed his affairs. So even though the boy was and heir and to be master over all, for all practical purposes, he might as well have been a slave since he had no freedom and could make no worthwhile decisions.

Likewise, those to whom Paul wrote were slaves to the law before coming to Christ. They had no liberty with regard to the things of God and were bound by the law, which acted as a guardian and an overseer until God should decide the time of Christ’s coming, whose work brought freedom to those in bondage.

*I.B. Before redemption, the Jewish believers, though they thought they were free, were in reality enslaved to the elemental forces of the world in the form of their primitive religion.*  
(3)

The Jewish believers did not consider that they, too, were in bondage just as were the Gentiles. Under the law, the believer-to-be is like a child under guardianship but is also enslaved since he has no rights and no liberty. Paul says that they were enslaved to the “elemental forces” of the world. Both Paul’s words and his point in this verse are not so clear.

The word στοιχεῖα can refer to rudiments of learning, such as ABC’s; to elements, as in things from which other things are made, much as we might refer to chemicals or other building blocks of natural or man-made things; or to elemental forces in the sense of spirits. Each of these interpretations has, to varying degrees, evidence for or against but none is without

difficulties, although the second seems the least likely unless used in a figurative sense to refer to the law as the building blocks of Christianity. It is interesting that the first and the last interpretation can each be reconciled to a similar statement in vv. 8-10<sup>7</sup> and so one cannot dismiss the idea that the ambiguity is intentional or that Paul is using a double meaning, the Jews enslaved to things that were merely building blocks of something greater, the Gentiles were enslaved to elemental forces they thought were gods.

One must remember, however, that the word “world” refers not to the original created order, but more likely to the world as tainted by the fall. If so, then Paul is placing all religions in the same category as also having been tainted by the fall. This means that Judaism was no different than the religion of the Gentiles in this respect: it had no power to bring life or liberty, and yet its adherents sought these same elementary and rudimentary things through their own works and righteousness. But in so doing, they were really in bondage because they could not do these things in their quest to earn their justification. Even the law was twisted from its original purpose and distorted by humanity’s fallen desire to seek to earn favor with God.

The connection to vv. 1-2 is clear, however: no matter how privileged or free they thought they were, they were in reality no better than servants and still in bondage. Only Christ’s work at his coming would set them, and us, free and make them, and us, heirs.

*I.C. The coming of the Savior was for the purpose of redeeming those who were so enslaved so that they might instead become sons of God with full rights and privileges.(4-5, 7)*

Galatians 4:4-5 is often used to argue for the first century of the common era as the apex of human civilization, with the Greek language, Roman law and methods and modes of Roman transportation, the history of the Jews, religious and cultural, all converging at that one time in history serving to make that time the optimal time for our Lord to enter the world in his

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<sup>7</sup> The rudimentary interpretation corresponds to “days and months and seasons and years” in v. 10 and the elemental spirits interpretation to the “those which by nature are not gods” reference in v. 8.

Incarnation. While much of that is true, and God does wonderfully guide history, now as well as then, to accomplish his purposes, such a digression misses the point of these verses in their context. The point for Paul's saying that Christ's Incarnation occurred "when the fullness of time had come" was to continue working out Paul's illustration from vv. 1-2. There, Paul pointed out that the child would remain "under guardians and managers until the time appointed by the father." The time for the child to become heir was not determined by cultural, social, linguistic, or legal forces, but by the father. The "fullness of time" (a phrase unique in the NT though closely paralleled by Eph. 1:10) emphasizes the appropriateness of the time of Christ's coming and encourages one to view that time as the high point of history. It is such, however, not because the time was right, since the time was right simply because that was the time of God's own choosing, it is such because that is the time at which Christ came.

"God sent forth his son" because Christ was the one chosen by the father to do what the law, human desire, and human working could not do. That Christ was "sent" implies not only authority to carry out these tasks given to him by the Father, but also implies an entering into this realm of existence, one in which the presence of God was formerly hidden, so that God's will may be accomplished as he has directed. Paul refers to Christ, as "son," here not to point out the ontological relationship between Christ and the Father, though he does that elsewhere (cf. Phil. 2:6), but to emphasize the official nature of Christ's work in its connection with the Father.

Paul's explanation of Christ as being "born of a woman" may harken back to the promise of Genesis 3:15 but this is unlikely since he fails to place a definite article in front of "woman." More likely, Paul is emphasizing Christ's humanity.

In saying that Jesus was "born under the law," Paul reminds the reader that the law was important; so important, in fact, that Christ, in his humanity, was subject to it, though it did not

hold the place to which they esteemed it. Christ was “born under the law” and so was subject to it from birth, not just from the time he was able to understand it or submit to it. This natural state was the state to which Paul’s readers intended to return.

The absurdity of this desire is demonstrated in v. 5, which Paul introduces with ἵνα, here used to signify purpose. Christ was willingly born under the law to redeem those who were enslaved to the law so that they would no longer be slaves, but become sons, even heirs. To “redeem” was to buy a slave. Jew and Gentile alike were enslaved, not just in the sense of being slaves to sin, but were under guardianship and tutelage and so not fully enjoying the blessings of sonship and heirship. Through Christ’s redemption, they are not only set free from what enslaved them, they also enjoy “the adoption of sons” in which they realize the blessings of the promises which were spoken and of which the law was merely a shadow. His Paul emphasizes in v. 7 when he points out, building on his arguments up to this point, that through faith in Christ, Christ has removed his people from under bondage, so they are no longer servants, has made them sons, and so members of God’s family, and has gone one step further in making them heirs of God, anticipating then benefits of God’s blessings. That all this occurs “through God,” reminds one of the grace of God that takes those in bondage and sets them free.

*I.D. The Spirit of God is given to the believer which testifies of this relationship by crying out to God as Father. (6)*

When one reads vv. 6 and 7 together, it appears as if Paul is arguing in a circle or repeating himself unnecessarily, though upon further reflection one will see that this is not the case. The “therefore” in v. 7 pints out that Paul is drawing a conclusion from what he has said, as indicated above, not just from this section or these verses, but from everything up to this point. The reception of the Spirit is not the basis for one’s being a son and an heir; rather, one receives the Spirit, because he is a son. This Spirit, however, who dwells in the believer, does what the

law could never do since it remains outside the one who observes it: confirm the relationship between the believer and God. The participle κρᾶζον, “cries [out],” is neuter, as is the word for “Spirit,” emphasizing this important work by the Spirit, which Paul also alludes to in Romans 8:15-16. The Spirit cries out “Abba,” an Aramaic term which is one of intimacy and closeness. This term serves not only to remind the believer of the nature of this relationship, but also to soften the image one has of God as one who not only just and holy, but also gracious, merciful, and kind, helping the believer to keep both of these views in tension so that he may perceive God properly.

*II. The Galatians, by returning to observing the law, are returning to the bondage from which they were redeemed by the Father. (8-11)*

In this section, Paul applies the theology he has just taught by making a direct appeal to the Galatians. Paul expresses both concern and astonishment at their present state and their desire to go backward rather than forward.

*II.A. Their enslavement was the result of their ignorance of God, the opposite of the knowledge they now have of God. (8)*

This verse is rather clear: in their natural, unconverted state, the people did not know God and so were enslaved to those who appeared to be gods but were not. True knowledge of God is available only through Christ. Worship of other gods is futile because they are not really gods, lacking any nature that would make them real, much less superior. This Paul says to demonstrate the foolishness of abandoning the grace of Christ, which is tantamount to returning to their former bondage.

*II.B. Once one has been set free from bondage, it is foolish to return, but this is what they have done in seeking to return to the law and its observances. (9-11)*

Paul concludes his appeal in these verses by building on what he has previously said: to return to the slavery from which you have been liberated is foolish and this is what they are attempting to do by their return to the law.

*II.B.1. Their standing with God now is not the result of their burgeoning knowledge of God, but rather the result of God's knowing them. (9-10)*

If they had occasion to doubt whether God was behind their salvation, Paul dispels any question. What is important is not just that they “know God,” but that they are “known by God.” God has taken the initiative in their salvation. As Paul has pointed out in 3:3, “having begun in the Spirit,” that is, their conversion and salvation effected through the Spirit’s work in applying the benefits of Christ’s redemption, are they now seeking to be “made perfect through [instrumental dative] the flesh”? This places the onus and burden upon themselves when it wasn’t upon them to begin with, but upon God, who sought them out and accomplished salvation when they had no knowledge of its necessity. Now, they are letting themselves be placed again under tyranny by voluntarily “turning again” to those same enslaving forces in some misguided attempt to recapture what they never accomplished to begin with.

Those elements, which Paul has already mentioned, were powerless to save, and powerless even to keep them enslaved once the grace of Christ had rescued them. The Judaizers, as Paul’s opponents are often called, sought to place the Galatians in bondage and the Galatians may not have realized the extent of the bondage. The observance of “days and months and seasons and years” (v. 10) may seem like a far cry from legalism, and indeed, the law is good (1 Tim. 1:8) because it came from God, but in a system where these ungodly “elements” had completely taken over and where meticulous observance is a necessity, such observances will only restrict, not liberate.

These elements, though, are weak and worthless. What those elements were unable to do, the Galatians would do for them, by returning voluntarily. Such a return is beyond foolish because these elements are “weak and beggarly” (KJV), they are powerless and they are worthless. They cannot set men free nor can they provide an inheritance to one who is free.

*II.B.2. Paul is exasperated because he has preached the Gospel clearly to them and yet, it seems, that after all his labor they still refuse to believe. (11)*

Paul is not expressing here a belief that one may lose their salvation; such a discussion is not even close to the point of the passage. Paul is, however, expressing a genuine fear that those over whom he labored will abandon what he has preached. Having labored to preach the true gospel of grace, what a waste would it be if they later abandoned that gospel for a return to legalistic bondage. Paul cannot tolerate the legalism to which they were seeking to return and he expresses his fear that his ministry among them will be shown to be a wasted effort.

*Conclusion:*

Though Paul ends on a personal note of exasperation, his concern is not for his wasted effort, but for the Galatians’ spiritual well-being. Paul desires them not only to know, but to appreciate, the grace of God in Christ and the blessing of liberty resulting from Christ’s redemption. Paul does not seek merely a return to his preaching and theology for its own sake, though that would certainly be appropriate, but for their sake, so that they may enjoy their liberty in Christ. After reinforcing this point in the rest of chapter four, he will then turn to the Christian’s liberty and explain how Christ’s redemption enables one to enjoy relationship with God as an heir.

## **Movement to Homiletics / Pedagogy**

*Theme:* If you've been set free, don't go back to living like a slave.

### I. God redeemed you from slavery and made you his son. (1-7)

The Old Testament saints were under the guardianship of the law until Christ came, but they thought they were of all people most free. In reality, they were enslaved to forces they neither understood nor could control, just as were the Gentiles. Christ came to redeem those who were so enslaved, both Jew and Gentile, and he did so on God's terms, at God's time, and through no work or labor of our own. Because of Christ, God gives to those who trust in him the full rights and privileges of a son. As proof of this, and to accomplish his will in them, God gives to these redeemed ones the Holy Spirit, who cries out to the Father from within to testify to their relationship with God.

Since all of this was done under God's initiative, in God's power, through God's means, and since you were unable to contribute in any way to this divine plan except for faith in Christ, why then would you believe that you can maintain this relationship on your own terms, through your own means, by your own labor? Such thought is foolishness. You are not a slave any longer; you are God's son. You are his heir simply because you are his son. Live like his son, enjoy the privilege of being his son, and don't live like you can or must work to earn his favor.

### II. To return to the law is to renounce your adoption and return to bondage. (8-11)

They worshipped and served other Gods because they were ignorant of the one true God. God has since revealed himself in Christ and so they can say that they now truly know God. More importantly, they are known by God, and thus have been adopted. In their return to the observance of the law with its rituals and holy days, they are really returning to the bondage under which they lived when they were ignorant of God. It is as if Paul has wasted his time and energy to bring to Christ.

Even our knowledge of God is the result of God's initiative. While we must know him, we only know him because he knows us and has revealed himself. Those elements of the law and of nature that you worshipped and served before know God, they could not bring you close to God then, why would you believe that they can bring you closer to God now? Stop ignoring the grace of God by going back into bondage through slavishly observing human standards in a foolish attempt to determine who is closer to God and who is not.

## APPENDIX: The Textual Variant in Gal. 4:7

<u>Variant</u>	<u>Alexandrian</u>	<u>Western</u>	<u>Byzantine</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Notes</u>
διὰ θεοῦ	P <sup>46</sup> N* A B C* 33 1739* <sup>vid</sup> Didymus <sup>dub2/3</sup>	it <sup>b, f, g, r, o, s</sup> vg Clement Cyril Victorinus-Rome Augustine	Basil Ambrosiaster Niceta Pelagius		
Dates	ca 200 IV V IV V IX X 398	VIII/IX IX IX VI/VII VII VIII IV pre-215 444 363 430	379 post-384 post-414 post-418		
Notes	strong support across a broad range of types	and so probably the best reading of all of them.			
διὰ θεοῦ	1881	F G			
Dates	XIV	IX IX			
Notes	Only three	witnesses and	all very late.		
διὰ χριστοῦ	81 cop <sup>sa</sup>	syr <sup>pal</sup> Jerome	2464	Eusebius-Emesa	
Dates	1044 III	XI 419/420	IX	359	
Notes	Broad support,	but mostly late	ms and not very	many witnesses.	
διὰ ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ	1739 <sup>c</sup>		1592 / 1593 / 1439		
Dates	X		1576 XV XII		
Notes	Only one attestation in a late recension of	a ms and a handful of lectionaries make	this reading unlikely.		
θεοῦ			1962	arm	
Dates			X	V	
Notes	One late Byz and	a version make this reading	unlikely as well.		
θεοῦ διὰ χριστοῦ	N <sup>2</sup> C <sup>3</sup> 104 256 365 424 1175 Athanasius Didymus <sup>dub1/3</sup>	D 1912 it <sup>ar, d</sup>	075 0150 459 1573 1852 2200 K L Theodore <sup>lat</sup> Theodoret <sup>1/2</sup> John-Damascus slav <sup>ms</sup> Chrysostom Byz Lect	436 1241 1319 geo <sup>2</sup>	
Dates	IV V 1087 XI/XII XII XII/XIII? XI 373 398	V X IX V/VI 428	X IX 1092 XII/XIII XIII XIV IX VIII 428 ca 466 pre-754 IX 407	XI XII XII V	
Notes	Also has strong support across a broad range,	but mostly Byz and later recensions of major mss.			

<u>Variant</u>	<u>Alexandrian</u>	<u>Western</u>	<u>Byzantine</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>Notes</u>
θεου δια ιησου χριστου	P 6 eth		263 2127 l 422 l 591 l 597 l 884 l 1154 l 1298 l 1356 l 1443 l 1590 syr <sup>p, h</sup> slav <sup>ms</sup> Theodoret <sup>1/2</sup>		
Dates	IX XIII ca 500		XIII XII XIV XI X XII XII XI XI 1053 XIII V 616 IX ca 466		
Notes	not very well attested; very little ms evidence, most of its support is from Byzantine lectionaries				
μεν θεου συγκληρονομος δε χριστου (cf. Rom. 8:17)	Ψ 044		PS-Athanasius		
Dates	IX/X		?		
Notes	the least- and worst-attested reading				
Conclusion	The UBS <sup>4</sup> made the most reasonable decision in preserving the reading it did and in giving it an {A} rating.				

**Evaluation:**

While there are eight variant readings for this verse, all but two suffer from either too few witnesses (e.g., μὲν θεοῦ συγκληρονόμος δὲ Χριστου), too narrow geographic support (e.g., διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστου), late witnesses (e.g., θεου, which only has two attestations to begin with), or combinations of the above (e.g., θεοῦ διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστου). One simply does not make sense in the context (e.g., διὰ θεόν) while also having some of the problems described above.

The two readings that seem most likely are θεοῦ διὰ Χριστου and διὰ θεου. The first one not only makes sense internally, but also strengthens Paul's statement by keeping Christ squarely in the center of the argument. This reading has a not insubstantial body of witnesses across a broad range of text-types, but most of the support is from Byzantine manuscripts or later recensions of major earlier manuscripts. There are several Church Fathers who cite this reading, but even their support is not as diverse as the support for the reading in the text.

The last reading, simply διὰ θεου, fits with the flow of the sentence and the context of the passage, can be seen as the source for the other readings,<sup>8</sup> and also has the best support from the earliest manuscripts, support across a broad range of types, and diverse attestation in the Fathers. Thus, Metzger includes it in the text and gives it an {A} rating.

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<sup>8</sup> So Bruce Metzger, *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 526.

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