

# Dr. Tim Gombis, Galatians, Session 6, Galatians 4:1-5:1

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This is Dr. Tim Gombis and his teaching on the book of Galatians. This is session 6 on Galatians 4:1-5:1.

Welcome to the sixth lecture on Galatians. In this lecture, we're going to cover Galatians 4.1 to 5.1. We're coming out of Galatians 3 with a bunch of complicated, sort of convoluted to us, arguments that Paul makes. But remember, Paul is bringing to bear all of his learning, all of his education, the fact that his mind and heart are just saturated with Scripture. He marshals all these arguments to make with his Jewish Christian opponents who are there in Galatia.

And now he's going to turn and make some exhortations to the Galatian Gentiles in chapter four. The first one of those exhortations is in four, one through eleven, where Paul exhorts his audience, his audiences, not to return to slavery. Don't return to slavery.

And here's where it's really helpful to keep in mind the apocalyptic context of Galatians, or I should say Paul's apocalyptic theology. That is to say, Paul is working theologically on a canvas that stretches across the cosmos. He's thinking in terms of ages, the old age and the new age.

He's thinking in terms of these cosmic forces that are at work, the cosmic power of sin and death and flesh that have infected God's world. Galatians is not an apocalyptic piece of literature. It doesn't involve bold judgments and horsemen and all that kind of stuff, but it's sort of on an apocalyptic stage because it involves activity on earth and activity in the heavens.

Activity in the physical realm with how people adorn their bodies. Do they need to adorn their bodies as Jewish bodies? So, there's the physical realm. Then there's the spiritual realm.

Sin and flesh and death and cosmic enemies are in view here. And, of course, there are cosmic realities that Paul talks about that have changed everything because God and Christ have altered reality in the death and resurrection of Jesus and in the setting of the Spirit has changed the game completely in the spiritual realm, and that is embodied in the physical realm. So, ultimately, Paul wants his audiences to know that Gentiles don't think that you have to convert to Judaism.

You can be saved in Christ by rendering faith or faithfulness to God alone without having to change ethnicity. That reality in the physical realm is the physical

embodiment of all kinds of different realities that have gone on in the spiritual realm. So, just to say, when we talk about the apocalyptic scope of Paul's theology, I'm talking about how the drama is carried out on the earthly stage and in the spiritual realm as well.

Well, Paul's argument here in Galatians 4, 1 through 11, depends on some apocalyptic elements, and these are found in verse 3 of chapter 4 when he says so also we while we were children were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. That expression elemental things of the world is the Greek term *stoicheia* which, in a Jewish perspective, means something very strategic. That term also is used in verse 9. How is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? There's also another, excuse me, there's also another expression used here in verse 8. However, at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who, by nature, are no gods.

So, there are these spiritual entities that, this term the *stoicheia* or what Paul says, are not gods; these are actually spiritual entities that play a strategic role in Paul's apocalyptic theology. On an Old Testament conception of things, these are the you know, the angels of the or the gods of the nations in Jewish texts sometimes talk about the angels of the nations. In Job, these are referred to as the sons of God.

They appear in Daniel, Daniel 10. The Prince of Persia and the Prince of Greece appear there. Remember Paul's theological view of things, or I should say an Old Testament view of things, Old Testament expectations, and Jewish expectations. There was the present evil age in this era, and this was an age that was overseen by all of these archangelic ruler figures or these gods of the nations, these spiritual entities that exercised oversight of God's world at a macro level.

Don't think in terms of demons or spirits that over that that often in the pages of the Gospels infected or affected or oppressed or enslaved or inhabited individual bodies. These are spiritual entities of great power that work at sort of a macro level, overseeing the lives of nations. They oversee the nature of culture.

They oversee cultural patterns and cultural assumptions. In Deuteronomy 32, the text says there in Deuteronomy 32 8 that God appointed a number of these figures in accordance with the number of the nations that there were.

So, over each of these nations, God appointed one of these figures, one of these gods of the nations or an angel of the nations, to sort of organize and oversee the life of that nation. But on an Old Testament conception of things, God himself was the one who oversaw the life of Israel. It appears that this was, according to God's design, even sort of apart from fallenness, that God, who often works through mediators, oversees his rule of the earth through humanity.

It appears that he also oversaw larger elements of his creation through these archangelic ruler figures, these sons of God, or these gods of the nations. And that was sort of by design, he meant to do that. Well, according to Jewish tradition, most if not many or most of these archangelic ruler figures, these gods of the nations, or in some Jewish texts called stoichea, which Paul calls them here twice, these figures have rebelled and they are now working against God's purposes.

And these are the figures that hold creation enslaved. And when Jews, and this is reflected in Daniel, when Jews looked out in the lives of other nations, and they saw those nations as having a national life that was held enslaved to idolatry, what Jews would have thought is these are nations that are being led astray from the one true God by one of these archangelic figures or by one of these, you know, a god of the nation as it were. And they're being told a lie that there is this kind of whole, you know, there's an idol that oversees that nation.

Behind that lie, behind that idol, is actually one of these deity kinds of figures, this creation of the one true God who was appointed to rule over the life of that nation. So just to say when Paul, on a cosmic level, when Paul imagines the life of the present evil age, he imagines that this is why he calls it the present evil age, because it is an age that is overseen by a range of these characters that are standing and they're arrayed together against the rule of God, okay. And how Paul configures things is that, and this is how he theologizes here in Galatians, and this is one other way of sort of thinking, I think, properly about Judaism and the Mosaic law.

In an age like this, in an enslaved context, God sent the Mosaic law, and he created the nation Israel in that kind of context. So, into an enslaved cosmic situation, you know, God gives the law and creates Israel. Later on, this is what Judaism became. And in Paul's theological vision, these are all gifts from God.

Mosaic law is a gift from God. Israel was meant to be a distinct people, God's beloved people, so that God could then reach out to the nations and bring them into his love. That was God's design.

All of these are good things. But one of the, if I could say it this way, one of the geniuses of evil, one of the geniuses of the present evil age, is that everything sort of intended for good is sort of twisted and turned and manipulated and turned towards an oppressive and destructive end. In Paul's theological vision, there's a sense in which God's intended distinction between Israel and the other nations, that distinction, and there was intended to be a distinction, that distinction did not become the border at which Israel met the nations to figure out how they could enjoy together the blessing of God.

That distinction became the site at which animosities developed between Israel and the nations. As Paul looks back after the advent of the death and resurrection of Christ, as he looks back on this present evil age, he sees that what Judaism has become is a reality that was more shaped by the present evil age than by God's intentions. So, when he says things like turning back and becoming enslaved to the stichera and to those who, by nature, are no gods, he is not denigrating Judaism in itself.

He's not denigrating Israel. He's not denigrating the law, but he's pointing back to an era that the mosaic law and the creation of Israel could not fix. God gave the law for the redemption of the nations, but what sort of happened was on a cosmic level. The cosmos needed to be changed.

And the mosaic law was not given to actually bring that about. The new creation had to be brought about, and this age could only be sort of destroyed and put to death by the death and resurrection of Christ. So, if we're thinking individualistically, and if we're thinking about salvation from simply an individual perspective, we will think about Judaism and the gospel or the law and the gospel or the mosaic, you know, the mosaic administration and the gospel of Christ.

We'll think about those as how they affected the individual, but really, we need to think from a cosmic perspective before we turn to move to a corporate perspective, before we then theologize about life from an individual perspective. So, let me erase this and maybe work with a slightly different image that represents the same kind of reality. I have spoken already about these two ages, the present evil age, the crossover of the ages, and the cross as that which brought about the new creation, which is the arena that will transform into the kingdom of God in the eschatological future, and how it is that we inhabit this kind of crossover of the ages right here.

In Paul's theology, he basically sees this era, this present evil age, as overseen by these cosmic ruler figures who stand against God's purposes and are working for the enslavement of humanity. Now, this whole era, because of the cross, this whole cosmic reality is going down to destruction and will be destroyed. That is going to make sense of something that Paul says down the road here.

If you sow to the flesh, you will reap destruction. If you sow to the spirit, you will reap eternal life because a community that invests in attitudes and behaviors here will be a community that will be destroyed with this era when it is destroyed. The community that invests itself here and bears the fruits of the spirit will reap the rewards of that, which is eternal life.

However, this is an era where there's guaranteed destruction because it is overseen by these spiritual entities. What Paul is basically saying here in verses 1 through 11 is that while the church needs to sort of press into their identity and behaviors that are

constituted by this reality to take on Jewish identity, it would be for these Gentile Christians to actually reverse course and to become enslaved to an era or to spiritual entities that oversee the present evil age. Now for Gentile, that is to say, Paul is not saying that Judaism itself is an enslaving dynamic.

He's not saying that the Mosaic law itself is an enslaving dynamic, but he is saying that the message directed to Gentiles, that Gentiles have to change ethnicities in order to be blessed by the one true God, that message is a message that comes from this era and to hold to that message is actually to return to that era. It's very similar to, you know, someone saying nowadays, as a Western American Christian, if I meet a Portuguese person, for me to say for you to inherit and inhabit the salvation that God offers in Christ is for you to receive Christ and get an American passport. You have to change ethnicity and begin celebrating the 4th of July.

It's put off your Portuguese identity, change your identity, and learn all these new habits. You know, get up early in the morning and work 10-hour days and that kind of stuff and don't do siesta anymore or whatever. All the cultural habits need to be put aside.

That would be an enslaving message because God is not glorified by the whole international order, becoming one single ethnicity. God is glorified by having a multi-ethnic, multi-national people of God sort of theologically. The creator God is glorified through humanity being a symphony rather than all of humanity playing a single note.

God wants to be seen as the God who is the great king of all nations, not just one nation. So that is the kind of cosmic scenario that makes, I think, Galatians 4:1 through 11 make good sense. So, what when Paul says, now I say as long as the heir is a child, he's basically a slave.

And he's going back actually to talk about, well, he does not differ at all from a slave even though he's the owner of everything. So, an heir, someone who's going to receive something in the future at a certain time, is overseen by managers and governors. He's really talking about the condition of Jewish Christians, which he had just talked about at the end of Galatians 3. The need or I should say the role that the Mosaic law played of being a tutor, hemming in Israel as a distinct entity until Christ arrived on the scene.

Being under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So, Paul then says in verse 3, so also we, and I think here he's talking still about Jewish Christians, while we were children before Christ, Jews were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world, which is kind of a radical statement. Here, he's associating his pre-Christ Jewish identity with identity under what he also recalls as the powers and authorities, rebelling against the one true God cosmic entities.

So, this is sort of a radical statement. Again, in Galatians, he gives a darker picture of Jewish identity than he would in the abstract. But he wants to portray that as an existence under cosmic enslavement.

So, in verse 4, at the fullest of time, God sent forth his son into that enslaved condition, into that cosmically oppressed condition. Into that condition, the son came, born of a woman, born under the law, in order that he might redeem those who are under the law, that is, Jews, that we might receive the adoption as sons. That is Paul still speaking of himself, the Jewish Christian missionaries, people like Peter, Barnabas, etc.

Even though he knows that, of course, salvation is now extended to Gentiles. So, the picture here is enslavement under hostile cosmic powers, God sending the son into that condition, and Jesus arriving into this enslaved condition. This is why more recent interpreters of Galatians, such as apocalyptic interpreters like J. Louis Martin, Beverly Gaventa, John Barclay, etc.

will talk about the incarnation and, sorry, what's his name, did the recent Galatians commentary, Martin DeBoer. Apocalyptic interpreters will talk about cosmic enslavement and the arrival of Jesus Christ into the world as a sort of God's apocalyptic invasion into that enslaved condition. The son kind of comes into this enslaved condition as an invasion into enemy territory to liberate a people and to bring them into the new creation.

Sort of a forceful, dramatic way of seeing things. So, based on that condition and this situation, we get these exhortations in verses 9 through 11. But now that you have come to know God, remember at the end of chapter 3, or the middle of chapter 3, Paul portraying the intimacy with God that all Jews and Gentiles in Christ have with God, the unmediated relationship with God.

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, these *stoicheia*, these elemental spirits, these cosmic ruler figures that oversee the present evil age and ensure that it's an enslaving existence. Why would you turn back to them and desire to be enslaved all over to them again? You observe days and months and seasons and years, an expression that by the way comes from Genesis, the creation account. I fear for you that perhaps I've labored over you in vain.

So, Paul does see these Galatian Gentiles turning back to the rule, turning towards Jewish identity as a turn towards enslavement. As I said, for Jews to observe the Jewish calendar is not an enslaving existence in itself. Paul did.

In Acts 21, Paul is eager to get back to Jerusalem for the festival because Paul is a Jew. So, he fully inhabits, as do other Jewish Christians, their Jewish identity because that's worthy of being celebrated. That's one way of celebrating God's kingship.

There are other ways of celebrating God's kingship, such as following Jesus as a Turkish Christian and celebrating his kingship in a way that is unique to Turkish, Egyptian, Syrian, and whatever. So, Paul is building this on a genuine scriptural theology of God, who is the one king over all the nations. So, not to say that days, months, seasons, and years are bad things, but the Gentile Christians in Galatia need to celebrate their own days, months, and seasons, and years that are particular to their ethnicity.

So, moving on to verses 12 to 20, Paul now makes some personal exhortations. In verse 12, he says, I beg of you, brothers, become as I am because I have become as you are. What does he mean by that? Paul, again, if we think about the arrangement that we had set up, has moved out from that exclusivist view, and he is now fellowshipping among in a reality that is constant, the new creation reality that is constituted of all Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

Here's where Paul is. These Gentile Christians wanting to go back here, well, Paul has left that. He's died to this reality because of his participation in the death of Christ.

He's abiding over here with fellow Jewish Christians, with fellow Gentile Christians. So, he's calling on his brothers in Galatia: you're leaving me; I've already joined you, so become as I am, become a good Gentile. As it were, he's already linked up with those who would be regarded as sinners or pagans.

We already talked about some of these very personal notes here, but Paul recalls the time when he was with them. You know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel for the first time. Remember, we talked about his original visit there in Galatia because he had just endured a stoning, which resulted in his death and resuscitation and just an awful bodily condition.

He must have been just a punching bag of a corpse at that point, a bag of bones needing to be brought back to health to some extent. And that which was a trial to you, my appearance put you to the test. You did not despise me or loathe me.

You received me as an angel of God, as Christ himself. This is a passionate appeal. Where, then, is that sense of blessing that you had? For I bear, you witness that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.

Have I, therefore, become your enemy by telling you the truth? So, this is a passionate personal appeal to the Galatians to attend to what he is saying and recall his first visit with them. Referring to the Jerusalem missionaries in verse 17, he

accuses them of playing manipulative games. They eagerly seek you, but not commendably.

That is, they want to have you. They wanted to shut you out so that you could seek them. That is to say, the Jewish missionaries want to say, you people are on the outside; we have something that you want.

So, they want to be sought, but they're doing it by shutting out the Gentiles. And Paul says in verse 18 it is indeed good to be eagerly sought but in a commendable manner. And he talks about how he is in labor with them until Christ is fully formed in them.

Finally, in this section of Galatians, the chapter of Galatians 4, we get this allegory in 4.21 to 5.1, this allegory of Sarah and Hagar, which is the bane of every hermeneutics professor. Paul does something here that runs against the grain of what hermeneutics professors say anybody should do with biblical texts. That is, he presents, apparently, some kind of an allegorical interpretation.

Of course, there are folks that say, well, it's not actually what he really does. But Paul seems to indicate that that's what he does when he says, in verse 24, this is allegorically speaking. So, he's presenting a sort of interpretation by allegory.

Well, let me just say that I think what Paul is actually doing here is that he's not presenting an interpretation of the text. He's not going back to this Old Testament passage, the narrative of Sarah and Hagar, and saying, this is actually what this Old Testament text means here in Genesis. He's not presenting an interpretation, even though I think in many ways, with the onset of what we've called in this era of interpretation, theological interpretation, this is more or less a theological reading or a theological interpretation of this text.

Because in this scenario, we're not moving from an Old Testament text and its interpretation to a contemporary application. There's a sense in which theological interpretation inhabits biblical texts to understand the ways of God with his people. What are some of the patterns that we see running through Scripture, and what does God want from his people in a variety of challenges and opportunities? And because Paul's mind is Scripture-saturated and Scripture-shaped, when he thinks about this situation there in Galatia, as he's frustrated and laying out these exhortations and charges and accusations against the opponents there in Galatia and with his audience there, this narrative of Sarah and Hagar pops up in his imagination, and he configures the situation in Galatia.

He sort of drags that out of its situation there in Galatia and absorbs it into a scriptural setting, and then he just sort of speaks Bible language back at it in order to sort of configure things according to God's logic. This is how theological



interpretation works. Collapse the walls between contemporary situations and biblical texts, and see how they might reconfigure themselves in a way that brings about God's logic.

So, this is sort of theological reading of Scripture, and not necessarily grammatical-historical exegesis, but really what Paul is doing here is he's making a number of associations that Paul wants to shape the Galatian imagination so that they'll know what to do. This is sort of, if anything, sort of an analogy. It's not an interpretation.

But you notice what Paul says in verse 21: Tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not listen to the law in its sort of speaking as Scripture's voice? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman over here, the slave woman, and one by the free woman. And then he sort of makes under the slave category, he makes a number of associations, and under the free category he makes a number of associations, and under the category he speaks of Hagar, Ishmael, Flesh, Mount Sinai, and the present Jerusalem, which would be provocative, especially if the Jerusalem missionaries are sitting there in the audience. That is an absolutely inflammatory association.

In the free category, he makes a number of other associations. Sarah, the free woman, Isaac, the line of promise. He also talks about the promise and the spirit, and finally, he speaks about Jerusalem above.

So, the sort of the heavenly or the kingdom of God destination of the new creation, this is where he wants to associate all those free labels, and this is where he wants to associate all those kind of slave labels. So, he basically takes this Old Testament story, dumps it on top of the situation there in Galatia, and then brings to bear this exhortation from Isaiah 54, speaking about the restored Jerusalem, which is what Isaiah is talking about. Again, Paul's very creative sort of bringing together biblical texts.

We've got the Sarah and Hagar narrative, and that makes him think of this other biblical text from Isaiah that says this: Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear, break forth and shout, you who are not in labor, for more are the children of the desolate than the one who has a husband. And you, brothers, you there in Galatia are like Isaac. You are children of promise.

But as at that time, the one who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the spirit, what does that say about the situation in Galatia? He's associating the Jewish missionaries with the children of the flesh and associating the Galatian Gentiles with the children of the spirit. The same is true now there in Galatia. Well, with regard to all these narratives, what does the scripture say? Here's where he brings to bear this text.

Here's where he wants to lead the Galatians. Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman. So then, brothers, we are not children of a bondwoman but of the free woman.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free. Therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery. You are over here in the realm of freedom.

There is someone drawing you back. These people, who are actually children of the slave woman, they're drawing you back to slavery. Don't listen to them.

You have been set free into the fullness of enjoyment of the presence of the spirit. You Jewish Christians, this is what was promised to Abraham long ago. You Gentiles, this is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise that all the nations will be blessed.

This is the era of freedom. Don't be pulled back into slavery. A couple of things to say about the nature of this kind of freedom, however.

Don't imagine that this kind of freedom that Paul is talking about is the same as modern Western libertarian freedom, which is to do anything that you want. The kind of freedom that Paul is talking about is, as we've said before, freedom from falsely constructed identities, having my Christian identity associated with any kind of ethnicity, the freedom from socially put upon expectations, freedom from condemnation from other Christians, from not being good enough. In fact, this is where I think the deeper impulses of Paul's theology in Galatians are so applicable to today's Christian culture.

Depends on where you're watching this from, but especially for American Christians who are endlessly creative. We've put our creativity to use to kind of package Christianity in a number of different terms. So those people who have young families, we're told by this publisher, this speaker, this marketing group, here's how you have the perfect Christian family.

Buy this book. Go to these seminars. What inevitably happens there, though, is that the people doing family this way begin to sort of pass judgment on people doing family a different way, and the people not buying that package can pass judgment on these people.

So, I mean, Christianity sort of gets absorbed into a kind of present evil age thinking so subtly and so easily. Are you going to this, you know, how to manage your money kind of according to God's word seminar, or are you not? So, are you part of the in-group or part of the out-group? Freedom in Christ is being free from all of that kind of stuff, not being free to do whatever you want, but freedom from people pressing their expectations on you to determine what really pleases God. What pleases God is a life of faith lived in self-sacrificial love and, of course, freedom to participate fully in

what God is doing, to experience the liberating power of the Spirit, which, according to earthly expectations, is really always going to be counterintuitive.

Since we always, everybody has their imagination shaped by present evil age thinking to one extent or another, being delivered into the new creation is going to be recognizing that when I am set, I experience the liberating power of the Spirit when I as a middle-class white Christian am set alongside of other Christians who are of a different social class. When I, as a white male, am set next to Hispanic and African-American Christians to experience the wonder of God's blessing, I can, this is sort of freedom to experience the wonder of God's goodness with people who I'm told are other than I am, and are less than I am, or different than I am in one way or another. But experiencing God's liberating power is always going to be counterintuitive to the way that culture has shaped my imagination.

So, this is real freedom to inhabit the fullness of what God has done in creating his one multi-national, multi-ethnic family, which I think sets Christian identity on a trajectory of being an adventurer, to discover all the different ways and all the new ways of inhabiting Christian identity. When it comes to social ethics, sadly, Christians are often seen to be lagging behind the culture, but when it comes to social ethics, we're not supposed to be maybe out front of the culture doing what the culture is doing or what the culture will be doing someday. We just do social ethics in a radically different way.

Thinking in terms of the family that God is building, how can we inhabit that? How can we embody that? Again, that's not what we should be doing. That's what we get to be doing because when we do those things, we experience more and more of God's presence, more and more of God's life-giving spirit, more and more of God's renewing power among us, and that results in more and more in glory to God in Christ.

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