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CURSED BY WORKS OR BLESSED BY FAITH

A STUDY OF GALATIANS CHAPTER 3 AND 4:1-12

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Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree," in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13, 14)

The Bible is clear—blessing comes to us by faith, and not through any other means. Abraham believed God and was blessed. Today, those who believe God through the gospel of Jesus Christ are blessed, be they Jew or Gentile. The truth is rather simple. But the false applications that now abound have so confused this matter that even those who have believed the gospel are convinced that they must seek information from their own past, sinful lives to break curses and find the key to blessings. We often hear from such persons, Christians whom false teachers have convinced that they are cursed. Why do they seek help? Because of symptoms that trouble them which are then attributed to their failure to adequately identify the sources (whether demonic or in past experiences) of their troubled situation.

Paul wrote three epistles to churches in Asia Minor—Colossians, Ephesians, and Galatians. The people in Asia Minor were known to practice various forms of syncretistic, magic arts in the hope of averting bad fate. The last *CIC* article (Issue 122) showed how this was described in the book of Acts and explained how it applies to the interpretation of Ephesians. Galatians was written to churches who faced the same issues—this time in a form more distinctly Jewish—yet mixed with elements from pagan sources. This is not surprising, given the ample evidence from Acts and other historical sources that uncover the prevalence of religious mixture

that characterized Judaism in Asia Minor.

Paul's message is clear enough: To go back to practices that had never delivered anyone from the curse of the law would be to go back to being cursed, and not blessed. The only issue is one's status *vis-à-vis* Christ through faith. To change that would be to go back under the hostile powers from which they had fled through the gospel. Galatians 3:13, 14 teaches substitution: "for us" (*hyper* in the Greek). This word is often used in the New Testament for the substitutionary atonement (on our behalf). Paul sternly rebuked his Galatian readers, when he told them that if they proceeded in their Christian life on some different basis than they began, they were "bewitched." This we shall see as we study Galatians 3:1-3.

Blessing and cursing are relational, and not symptomatic. That means that what appears to be a bad situation caused by curses due to anything—past sins, ancestors, demons, hexes, past occult involvement, misinterpreted past memories, chronic sickness, strange feelings, demonic oppression, demonic manifestations in one's home, or an unlimited number of other possible symptoms of being cursed—are not an issue for those in Christ. We are blessed—period. Paul claimed that those who rely on any "works of law" (i.e., whether the Law or other practices that are law-works for Christians) depart from the only means of blessing—faith.

In preparing for this article I found it necessary to read volumes of scholarly material so I could be sure of my conclusions. Why was that necessary? Because I have found in my earlier studies that Galatians is often misused and misunderstood.

For example, the *stoicheia* (elemental spirits, or ABC's of religion, or elements, etc.) are mentioned in Galatians 4:3, 9. Many recent scholars understand the term as used in Colossians and Galatians to mean hostile spirits which were feared as the cause of bad fate. Clinton E. Arnold is one such scholar. In Asia Minor (which includes Colossians and Galatians) the *stoicheia* were understood to be demonic spirits.

In his book *The Colossian Syncretism*, Arnold addresses the situation in Galatia as well:

Paul continues his negative evaluation of the *stoicheia* in Galatians 4:9 by describing them as 'weak and beggarly' [Greek cited]. Here he is appealing to the Gentile Christians of Galatia not to turn to the law observances espoused by the Judaizing opponents (especially the rite of circumcision and the observance of food laws as well as festivals and sacred days). To orient one's life around the law in this fashion, according to Paul, is tantamount to returning to the domain of the demonic powers. For Paul, these are the same demonic powers that enslaved the Galatian Christians in their pagan past when they worshipped false gods. (Arnold: *Syncretism*, 184).

Peter O'Brien's commentary on Colossians identifies the *stoicheia* there as the "elemental spirits of the universe,' the principalities and powers which sought to tyrannize over the lives of men. . . . The apostle sets a stark contrast: whatever is in accordance with these demonic, personal powers stands over against Christ." O'Brien also mentions the term's use in Galatians as denoting

spirit beings, not merely religious ideas (O'Brien: 132).

Other terms are used in Galatians chapters 3 and 4 that raise many questions. These will be addressed as we proceed. My intent is to start from a simple premise, explore the complexities, and then demonstrate through careful exegesis that the simple premise (that believers are blessed and not cursed) is Paul's point. To add to that simple truth as a way to enhance one's status is to go back to the curse. That would be foolish. The blessed are those who belong to Christ through faith. Let's look at the details of the text to see if this conclusion holds.

Redeemed from the Curse of the Law

Galatians 3:13 says that Christians are redeemed from the curse through Christ's substitutionary work on the cross. **Galatians 3:10** makes it clear that this curse is universal: "*For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.'*" This does not only apply to the Jews. Paul makes it clear that this applies to all. Timothy George's commentary on Galatians explains this:

While the national and corporate character of the curse truly belongs to the background of this text, we must not allow this fact to blind us to the deeper doctrinal truth Paul was presenting here. . . . As Paul argued in Rom 1-3, both Jews and Gentiles are "under the law," albeit in very different ways. Thus when Paul spoke of the curse of the law he was not thinking merely of Jews, anymore than when he showed how one becomes a true child of Abraham through faith he had only Gentiles in mind. Thus the "us" of 3:13—those whom Christ has redeemed from the curse of the law—are not merely Jewish Christians but instead all the children of God, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and freed ones, males and females, who are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise because they belong to Christ through faith (3:26-29). (George: 233)

Blessing involves a radical change of status. It means going from being hopeless-

ly cursed to being blessed, all because of what Christ has done for us—a blessing we receive by faith. Once this has been accomplished, there is no more need to find a shaman-type to help us indentify curses.

The gospel truth is simple. Shamanistic cures are incredibly complex, endless, and, ultimately, hopeless. This we will soon document. But let us start with the simple truth that was evidently lost on some in Galatia. George distills it down to the essence: "Indeed, Paul's intricate argumentation in Gal. 3 and 4 can be reduced to one simple proposition: those who believe in Jesus Christ share fully in the blessings God promised to Abraham" (George: 216).

The blessings of Abraham are not dependant on law-works of any type. They are true of all who have been redeemed through faith, those who have been converted through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such persons are not cursed and must *not* proceed in the Christian life as if curses were still true and need to be identified and broken.

Having looked forward to our main point as stated in Galatians 3:13, 14, let us see why Paul brings us to that point by examining a false application of Galatians that is prevalent today. Many get the starting point correct, and then go forward as if Christians are cursed and need to do something else to be blessed.

Starting with the Gospel and Proceeding by the Flesh

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (**Galatians 3:1-3**)

We must be careful to understand this section of Galatians so we, too, are not "bewitched" by those who claim to have the key to free us from curses they deem to have caused our unhappy symptoms. One very popular yet sad example of this is found in the teachings of Neil T. Anderson. We shall examine those

teachings in light of Paul's intent when writing to the Galatians, then return to our discussion of Paul's claim that all who are in Christ are blessed and should proceed accordingly.

A "Non-Christian Spiritual Checklist" for Christians?

Anderson's book, *The Bondage Breaker*, has done much harm to Christians by convincing them their faith in Christ must be supplemented by prescribed prayers and renunciations. In so doing Anderson has made serious false applications of Paul's teachings and particularly trampled over Galatians 3:1-3.

The copy of Anderson's book before me boasts of more than one million copies sold. I have personally seen chronically troubled saints poring over the book, for years, hoping to find relief from such things as promised on the cover: "negative thoughts, irrational feelings, and habitual sins." This is abusive to these dear saints who are blessed in Christ but are told that their symptoms prove they have more to do. They must do a veritable survey of the flesh to find the walk of the Spirit. Thus the Galatian error is repeated.

In regard to Galatians 3:1-3, the Holy Spirit does not bring past sins to our minds. The accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10) keeps busy with that task. Colossians 2:13, 14 tells us that the debt is cancelled, the decrees against us nullified, and our sins forgiven. The work of the Holy Spirit is to remind us of what Christ has done, once for all, through the cross and point us to our future hope. Yet Anderson tells his readers to ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind past sins: "If something comes to mind and you are not sure what to do about it, trust that the Spirit of God is answering the prayer you just prayed, and go ahead and renounce it" (Anderson: *Bondage*, 202). The reader is directed to a long checklist (there are others in the book) and told to pray a prescribed prayer of renunciation of things that "the Holy Spirit has prompted you to renounce." The checklist has nearly 60 items (and whatever might be associated with them) plus whatever else comes to mind. What are they? They are

religions, magic, spells, curses, astrology, superstitions, and anything else that pagans typically get involved with. The last box to be checked is telling: "Movies, TV shows, music, books, magazines, or comics that the Lord is bringing to your mind." (Anderson: 204).

Having gone through the checklist and listened for special prompting from God, the reader is to repeat prescribed prayers of confession and renunciation "out loud." There is a checklist for bad motives and sins of the heart (Anderson: Anderson: 230). The confessions and renunciations have no logical end. Thus, Galatians 3:1-3 is violated, abrogated, and transgressed, all in the name of recognizing the reality of the *stoicheia* as demonic and not just the ABC's of religion. Clinton Arnold's endorsement of Anderson shows an unwillingness or inability to make appropriate application of pertinent Scripture in Colossians, Ephesians, and particularly Galatians. Writes Arnold:

Dr. Neil Anderson regularly encounters Christians struggling with problems often related to some kind of demonic influence. . . . Based upon Paul's teaching that Christians are called to appropriate God's power and resist the devil, Anderson helps these troubled Christians discover who they really are As a caring facilitator, Anderson prepares them to deal with the hostile influence of the powers *through their own volition and their own appropriation of the power and authority available to them* in the Lord Jesus Christ. (Arnold: Powers, 213 – emphasis mine)

Sadly, Arnold endorsed Anderson in 1992 and by 2000 Anderson had sold a million books pointing people ostensibly to Christ, but in reality to being agents of "appropriation" and human volition. To appropriate, as a verb, is not synonymous with "to believe." It is to say that we are still suffering the effects of curses, we could get free, but we need to do more to draw on the figurative reservoir of authority or we will suffer accordingly. Paul teaches the opposite in Galatians.

Prescribed prayers of renunciation (designed to remove curses from Christians) are foreign to the epistles Paul wrote to Asia Minor, including

Galatians. Anderson's book is replete with such prayers. For example:

'I here and now reject and disown the sins of my ancestors. I specifically renounce the sins of (list here the areas of family sin the Lord revealed to you). As one who has now been delivered from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of God's Son, I cancel out all demonic working that has been passed down to me from my family. As one who has been crucified and raised with Jesus Christ and who sits with Him in heavenly places, I renounce all satanic assignments that are directed toward me and my ministry. I cancel out every curse that Satan and his workers have put on me.' (Anderson: 241).

Anderson misses Paul's point altogether. He disregards the implications of Galatians 3:3, misapplies Galatians 3:13, takes terminology from Colossians 2:14 where God canceled out the certificate debt, and makes it something we still need to do now (verbally) as Christians. Furthermore, he fails to see that his prescribed prayers of renunciation over curses would be unknown without special revelation beyond Scripture and are therefore a new version of incantations in the name of Christ.

Human volition is prominent in Anderson's prescribed prayers and renunciations, but is not the issue in Galatians and never was. The issue was this: the Galatians wanted to add something to what God has done, and is doing, which would be tantamount to going back to the hostile powers from which God delivered them.

When those in Ephesus who practiced magic brought their books and burned them, it was a spontaneous act of repentance that attended believing the gospel, not some special work done later to break residual curses (see Acts 19:19). Yet Anderson (when endorsing a book that warns about "passivity" in Christians as grounds for evil spirits to work) writes: "You can't expect God to protect you from demonic influences if you don't take active part in His prepared strategy." (Anderson: 94). The problem is that there is no such "prepared strategy" to overcome passivity of

will to be found in the Bible. God's plan is to believe, not to find more willpower.

Now that we have seen a prominent, contemporary transgression of Galatians 3:1-3, let us see why this approach evokes such a harsh response from Paul (See also Galatians 5:1-7 where Paul asks more rhetorical questions and uses the phrase "fallen from grace").

Under the Spell of False Teachers

Paul rebuked the Galatians with his rhetorical question, "who bewitched you?". The Greek term *baskaino* (bewitched) is used only here in the New Testament. Its meaning, however, can be found in uses elsewhere in the Greek language of the time. It literally means "to cast an evil eye" or to practice magic. How literal is this in Galatians 3:1? It follows a term that means "foolish" or "stupid" in this context. Paul used strong words of rebuke for those enticed by the spell of false teaching. Timothy George comments on this:

In calling the Galatians foolish or stupid, Paul was not casting aspersions on their intelligence. No one can read the Letter to the Galatians without realizing that Paul presupposed a high level of intellectual ability on the part of his readers. The Galatians were not lacking in IQ but in spiritual discernment. (George: 206)

Paul calls those in the Galatian church "brothers" several times. They were, however, in grave danger by assuming that they should proceed on some basis other than how they began. They failed to understand the implications and correct applications of the gospel. George continues his assessment:

Paul was not content to explain the situation solely in human terms. "Who has bewitched you?" he asked, implying that the Galatians had become the objects of a sinister, supernatural ploy. . . . Literally the word means "to give someone the evil eye, to cast a spell over, to fascinate in the original sense of holding someone spellbound by an irresistible power." . . . On one level the answer to Paul's rhetorical question was very simple. The false teachers,

those heretical interlopers, had sown confusion and doubt among the believers of Galatia, leading them to their present state of spiritual disarray. (George: 207)

Paul had preached Christ to them, clearly, fully, and forthrightly. They had heard and believed the gospel. Now they were in a state of foolishness, bewitched by false teaching akin to the magic that they had left when they had turned to the gospel. The *stoicheia* they used to fear wanted them back. The false teachers offered to add things to the gospel to help them in that direction. George again offers an observation: “The ‘higher life’ they [false teachers] were promoting was in reality a step backwards into the negative sphere of human self-justification and rebellion against the grace of God.” (George: 213).

In Galatians 3:2, 3 Paul asks them to think about how they received the Holy Spirit—by works or by hearing of faith? The obvious answer is “hearing of faith.” Paul’s piercing question rebukes them. Are they so foolish to make a switch from faith to flesh and thereby go forward on a different basis—one antithetical to the blessing they had in Christ? This message was also pressed home to the Colossians who likewise wanted to add to what God had provided: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him” **Colossians 2:6**. The answer is always the sufficiency of Christ.

The Vanity of Works—More Rhetorical Questions

Did you suffer so many things in vain-- if indeed it was in vain? Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. (Galatians 3:4-6)

Paul’s claim is that those who received the gospel by faith, and suffered in various ways because of it, would have done so in vain if they determined to proceed by some basis other than faith and the imputed righteousness of Christ. The Christian life must proceed on the same

basis it began.

It may seem that Paul appeals to miracles and experience as the basis of faith rather than the objective truth of the gospel. That is not his point. They came to faith (Paul’s ministry in this part of Asia Minor is found in Acts 13 and 14) through gospel preaching. They had been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, suffered persecution from various fronts, and seen works of power that pointed them to Christ. But the issue was not merely spiritual experience that may or may not be the Holy Spirit, or the mere presence of works of power, but the gospel itself. They believed and thus “began in the Spirit.” This faith placed them in a new status: declared righteous. They believed God and thus were blessed as sons and were no longer slaves of the cruel taskmasters (Galatians 4 will elaborate).

To make the allure of supplementing faith seem more profound, the false teachers added practices from the Law of Moses. These practices originally were designed to keep Israel separate and distinct. Now the false teachers wanted to introduce Jewish/pagan syncretism (the enactment of various rules that are deemed binding but not ordained by God) which would create vanity and bondage. The Law may sound more attractive than the more pagan mixture at Colossae, but it would lead to the same result: bondage. Paul instead appealed to Abraham as he does in Romans 4. Abraham believed God. Faith, not works, caused a change of status and relationship. This is the essence of being a blessed son and not a slave.

What about Paul’s appeal to the experience of these Asia Minor Christians? Does this mean that experience supplants or grounds faith? No. They had been converted by a powerful act of God, through His Holy Spirit by means of the hearing of faith, not works. As Thomas Schreiner comments, “The dramatic work of the Spirit, however, was not due to their observance of works of law, but their hearing the message of the gospel with faith” (Schreiner: 186).

Those who believe God, like Abraham did, are blessed. Those who boast or work are not. The Holy Spirit leads us to confess Christ before a hostile

world and to address God as Father.

Yet most of the books published today on the matter of blessing and cursing teach us to look to our past or to the world around us to find freedom from curses. This, to be blunt, is absurd. It is utter vanity to have received the gospel through faith, to have begun one’s walk of faith as one reckoned righteous (like Abraham), and then to add law works, prescribed prayers, inventories of our old fleshly life, and the like to something that is already settled through the gospel. The Holy Spirit will carry us, by God’s grace, all the way to glorification (the point of Romans 8).

Galatians 3:10-12 teaches that all are cursed apart from the gospel and that to add anything to the gospel under the guise of making things better will only lead believers back toward horrible bondage. Thus Paul’s stern rebuke and solemn warnings are applied to those who should know better and are in grave danger.

The “Seed” is Christ

Having laid out the universality of the curse and the promise of the blessing to all who have faith in Christ (Galatians 3:10-14), Paul addresses his Galatian readers as “brothers” in Galatians 3:15. His stern warnings and rebukes (fools who are apparently bewitched) are designed to shock them to their spiritual senses. Why go back to bondage and servitude to the hostile, demonic powers when you have the status of being blessed and free in Christ? That is Paul’s point.

To drive this point home Paul uses a lesser-to-greater argument to show that the promise made to Abraham is greater, irrevocable, and directional: it points to the “Seed” (singular) who is Christ. (see George: 243-250) Paul will summarize this in **Galatians 3:29**: “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise.” (HCSB) This includes all believers, from all categories of people (Galatians 3:28), including male and female. The change of status from cursed to blessed for all who are in Christ is not dependent on anything but faith. It is really that simple. Faith needs an object, and the object is God

and His promise in Christ, which is what Abraham believed. Here is George's summary: "To be 'under the curse' is to belong to a family, to be implicated in a corporate solidarity that includes the whole human race and, for that matter, the world of nature as well (cf. Rom 8:18–27). In the same way, to be 'in Christ,' the true Seed (singular) of Abraham, is to find a new family, to become a child and heir of the promise through the adoption of grace" (George: 247).

To highlight the profundity of the blessing, Paul also describes the misery of the curse, even over those who were under the Law (Galatians 3:22-25).

Locked Up Prisoners

Galatians 3:22 is shocking when read literally. It says that all people (literally "the all") were locked up under sin by the Scripture! **Galatians 3:22**: "*But the Scripture has imprisoned everything under sin's power, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.*" (HCSB) If we take this literally, (as is borne out in the Greek) it says: "But Scripture locked up the all under sin, in order that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to the believing ones" (My translation). This highlights the universality of the curse which applies to all people, and even creation, as Paul teaches in Romans 8. This is a horrible situation which applies to all. We were locked up in prison with no way out. The term for "locked up" or "imprisoned" is used in Luke 5:6 for fish caught in a net. It is used in Romans 11:32 in a similar way where God locks up all in disobedience. In this verse, Scripture is either a metonymy for God, or a reference to the passage cited by Paul in Galatians 3:10. Most likely Paul, "personified Scripture for a metonymy for God himself." (George: 261)

Galatians 3:23 confirms that we were in custody—that is locked up and guarded. All were prisoners, in jail, cursed, with no way out until the coming faith (the Seed promise to be revealed) arrived. But the situation, however described, was horrible and dire. The failure to see that all of the bad news applies to all creates confusion.

Under a Harsh Taskmaster

The next piece of bad news is often seen as good, but that is not Paul's point. The pedagogue of Galatians 3:24, 25 (translated "tutor" NASB, or "schoolmaster" KJV) is *not* the person who helps us along with moral improvement, but must be seen in light of the many terms used for those who were under the curse. The "tutor" was part of it. Those locked up in prison under a *paidago_gos* (transliterated from the Greek) were not getting a good education to make them better. They were being harshly beaten so that they would not want that situation. George states: "Paul now shifted his image of the law from that of a surly sergeant keeping watch over prisoners to that of the, *paidago_gos*, a slave charged with the rearing and discipline of children." (George: 265) The situation before, we must remember, was bad. We all were cursed. The *paidago_gos* could be understood as helpful or harsh. Both cases existed. But here the emphasis is on the harsh: "However, that [helpful, educational] function is clearly not within the scope of Paul's meaning here. . . . No, in Galatians 3 the law is a stern disciplinarian, a harsh taskmaster." (George: 266).

The Good News

Paul transitions to the good news that has come as described in (Galatians 3:26-29). This is in contrast to the bad situation described in Galatians 3:22-25. All are "sons of God" (3:26). The blessed, reminded of their baptism in water, have "clothed themselves" with their new identity as blessed sons of God: "*For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ*" (**Galatians 3:27**). This new status is not dependent on the categories that separated people when they were under the old status of being cursed. The blessed sons are one in Christ be they Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. (Galatians 3:28). Their blessed status is not dependent on anything but what was done for them in Christ. They are the redeemed sons and daughters of God. Paul concludes: "*And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise*"

(Galatians 3:29).

Galatians 4:1-3 Our Previous Status

Those who are now the blessed used to be under the same curse as everyone else. This is why it would be so absurd to long to go back to the previous status or to proceed as if there was something to glean from the previous state of affairs to help us to completion.

Slaves Under Governors and Managers

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. (**Galatians 4:1, 2**)

The status of being like a slave under guardians and managers was a bad situation, as verse 3 will make clear. We need to remember that those who are in Christ had the previous status of being cursed. The metaphors continue to pile up. We would be fools who have fallen under the spell of the "evil eye" (bewitched) if we thought there was something beneficial to go back to. For those whose status will change through faith in Christ, there is an important *until*.

Under the Stoicheia

So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. (**Galatians 4:3 NRSV**)

Here the term *stoicheia* appears for the first time in Galatians. We will see it again in verse 9. It is clear that this is a bad situation since it is parallel to the other descriptions of the cursed. The *stoicheia* are demonic spirits. The people in Asia Minor feared bad fate caused by these beings. Those who interpret this to be merely the "ABC's" of religion miss the point.

All were enslaved. God, the implied agent in the Greek, (Longenecker: 165), put people under the *stoicheia*, and Israel is included. These are not merely ideas or ABC's of religion in this context. The term is used in the New Testament in Hebrews 5:12 to describe the basic teachings of Christianity, and in 2Peter 3:10, 12 to describe the physical ele-

ments that will be destroyed by God at the judgment. These uses reflect the range of meaning of the term, but Paul's use of *stoicheia* in Colossians and Galatians is different. Here it means "hostile forces."

Clinton Arnold comments on Paul's meaning of the term in Galatians 4:3, 9:

Jewish believers were at one time enslaved to the *stoicheia* by virtue of the fact that life under Torah was life in the old aeon—an age dominated by Satan and his forces (Gal. 4:3). But Christ has brought redemption (Gal. 4:5) for those "under law." Therefore, there is no reason for the Galatians to embrace Torah. To do so is tantamount to regressing to life in the old aeon where the evil *stoicheia* hold sway and where believers were formerly held in bondage by evil spirits through their idolatrous practices (Gal. 4:8-10). (Arnold: *Syncretism*: 191)

This explanation does the best justice to the context. Paul piles up terms that would dissuade anyone from wanting to go back. The hostile powers would be waiting for them to enslave them once again, if they were to go back.

Timothy George also sees the *stoicheia* as much more than the ABC's of religion: "The radical character of this bondage, which is the common lot of all the unsaved, Paul now expressed in terms of a universal subjection to a sinister coalition of evil powers he called [Greek cited which says 'the *stoicheia* of the world']" (George: 295). In Asia Minor, the issue was syncretism and fear of bad fate caused by the hostile powers. George comments on the *stoicheia* of the world (same phrase referenced above) in Galatians and Colossians: "The Galatian references to [phrase cited from the Greek] are briefer and more cryptic than those in Colossians. But there is good reason to believe that the same demonic forces and fatalistic powers Paul condemned at Colosse were also endemic in the pagan religious culture of Galatia. (George: 298)

This understanding of the religious climate in Asia Minor is seen in Acts, Colossians, Ephesians, and Galatians. The *stoicheia* and other terms for the forces of spiritual darkness were not

merely basic religious ideas, be they pagan, Jewish, or a mixture thereof. They were demonic forces who held their captives in prison, under guard, tormented them and harshly treated them. Believers were released from this state by Christ! They are blessed and not cursed.

Galatians 4:4-7 A Radical Change of Status

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. (Galatians 4:4-7)

Galatians 4:4 is rife with Christological significance, but our concern here is its significance in Paul's argument about our change of status from cursed to blessed. Verses 4-7 have a parallel structure revealed a couple of ways. First there is the chiasmic structure which was identified by J. B. Lightfoot in the 19th century. Longenecker lays this out visually for us:

A	God sent his Son,
B	born under the law,
B'	to redeem those under the law,
A'	that we might receive our full rights as sons.

(Longenecker: 166)

Another aspect of parallelism is found in the word "sent" which is identical in verses 4 and 6 ("*exapostello*" which means "to send forth"). God sent His son into the world and sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. We are the blessed sons and daughters of God, who have received the Spirit through faith.

The fullness of time ("fullness" is *ple_ro_ma* in the Greek which is an important concept in Paul's epistles to churches in Asia Minor – used 7 times), is also important for our understanding of the doctrine of Christ and the incarnation. But here it is linked to the concept of the "date set by the father" (Galatians 4:2) in the transition from slavery to the son who is the heir analo-

gy. The obvious point is that we have been adopted into the family of God and our status is radically changed. We are indeed blessed and no longer cursed.

Whereas we were previously under the demonic powers, the *stoicheia*, the hostile spirits who tormented us, we are now redeemed sons and daughters, freed from the curse of the law. Rather than being subjected as prisoners to the cruel prison guard, as slaves to the harsh managers, we are full heirs, sons who are indwelt by the Spirit of God with full access to the Father; and we can address Him as such. It is completely appropriate to rejoice as children of the King who now have the status of "fellow heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:15-17).

There are no Higher order Christians

Why would anyone with this glorious change of status want to comb through their own past situation, looking for curses? This would not only be absurd, but would provide ample evidence that such a person was a "bewitched fool" (Galatians 3:1) who should know better. The Galatians were in danger of doing that very thing when they expected that to add things left behind would enhance their status and situation. The reality was this: such a return would result in their rejecting the implications of redemption.

It is important to see that Paul does not describe two categories of Christians, those who have a special blessing that puts them in a better category than ordinary Christians and the rest. That false concept is precisely what led many in Colossae astray. They wanted to keep their superior status based on their previous higher order experience as pagans. Galatians 4:4-7 applies to all Christians, defining for all of us the reality of our status as blessed sons in Christ. Paul does not beckon us to become elite Christians more spiritual than the rest. Longenecker explains:

Paul has previously emphasized the importance of the Spirit in the Galatians' experience (3:2, 5, 14), and here he lays stress on the Spirit again. The primary function of the Spirit in one's life, however, is not to cause a believer in Jesus to become a

“spiritual” or “charismatic” person, as is so often popularly assumed, but to witness to the filial relation of the believer with God that has been established by the work of Christ—a witness both to the believer (so 3:2, 5) and to God the Father (so here). . . It is the Spirit who cries out to God the Father on behalf of the believer, though synonymously Paul can also say that the believer cries out to God the Father as energized by the Spirit (Rom 8:15). (Longenecker: 174)

What is true here is true of all who are redeemed, and never true of those who are not. The siren song of the “higher” or “deeper” life is a guise for longing to go back to the days of the shamans who mediated between us and the demons. We must reject this temptation. We already have our new status as blessed sons and daughters and must proceed by faith to completion (the “not yet” part of eschatological redemption) without looking back, not even to the Law.

But—Keep in Mind How Bad it Was—Galatians 4:8, 9

“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?” (Galatians 4:8, 9 NRSV)

I chose the NRSV here because it correctly identifies the *stoicheia* as “beings” and “spirits” rather than simply ABC’s of religion. Schreiner’s translation also uses “beings” (Schreiner: 277). However, the emphatic part of verse 8 translated “Formerly” should be brought out something like this: “But then indeed” with the concept of a strong contrast and strongly emphatic. George explains the importance of the contrast: “This verse opens with a strong adversative, *alla*, ‘however’ or ‘but,’ followed by a temporal adverb, *tote*, ‘then,’ which sets up the contrast that will follow in v. 9. Paul was drawing a sharp distinction between the pre-Christian past of the Galatian believers and their present status as adopted sons in the family of God”

(George: 310).

The Galatian Christians, who had been slaves to the hostile spiritual powers, now are Holy Spirit-indwelt sons and daughters who can rightly address God as “Father.” *But*, they want to add something from their past (whether law-keeping or a syncretistic mixture of paganism and Judaism) and thus go back to being slaves! The change of status issue and absurdity of the desire to go back continues throughout this section. These were not merely basic religious ideas, but demonic powers that enslave the lost. Paul said elsewhere that the pagans worship demons: “No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons” (1Corinthians 10:20).

The *stoicheia* are “by nature” not gods. They do not have the essential attributes of deity, which belong only to the triune God of the Bible. But they are real enough, and God turns those who reject Him over to them. These are not merely “projections of the human mind.” George comments: “Clearly, they [Paul and early Christians] understood them to be existent beings, fallen angels, demonic spirits, the *stoicheia* of the world described earlier. These elemental spirits were indeed real enough.” (George: 312).

Thomas Schreiner offers important observations on this:

Seeing the “elements” here as spiritual powers, as “elemental spirits,” makes good sense in that the Galatians are returning to the gods they previously served. . . . In any case, the Galatians’ desire for bondage is inexplicable and irrational. What is astonishing is that Paul equates subjection to Torah with paganism. One can only imagine the shock the Pauline assertion would have given the Judaizers! (Schreiner: 278, 279)

Why go back to slavery? Ironically the same temptation faced the wilderness wanderers in Moses’ day. The Galatians think that adding some stipulations from the Law will enhance their status in Christ. It is quite the opposite.

Known by God—the Incongruity of Return to Slavery (Galatians 4:9)

In this context, “know” is relational, not merely cognitive. Notice how Paul describes the situation: “*you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.*” From our perspective we have come to know God. But the reality is that God’s knowledge of His own is prioritized. Paul contrasts this to the pagan notion of the special status of the enlightened ones who possessed knowledge that, according to Colossians 2:8, came from the *stoicheia* who are the source of slavery! These beings to whom the Galatians are tempted to turn back are called “weak” and “beggarly” (i.e., “poor”). I will discuss the irony of that when I discuss Paul’s “weakness” and their previous reception of him.

There is another irony here as well. The Greek term for “turn back” (*epistrepho*) is mostly used for turning to God in conversion. It can refer to apostasy as well. This is illustrated by comparing 1Thessalonians 1:9 where it is used for turning from vain idols to God with 2Peter 2:21-22 for apostates. Paul told King Agrippa about his commission from the Lord to the Gentiles: “*To open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.*” (Acts 26:18). Paul used *epistrepho* “turn” to describe conversion. Now they contemplate turning back to the *stoicheia* under the guise of an enhanced Christian status. This would be a “reverse conversion” to bondage.

The “Deeper Life” Program to Go Back (Galatians 4:10, 11)

“*You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.*” (Galatians 4:10, 11)

The interlopers wished to help the Galatian Christians gain enhanced status through the observance of special days. Whatever this had in common with the issue in Colossae (Colossians 2:16 mentions, “festival, new moon, or Sabbath day”), the Galatian version was

more Jewish which seemed to them to make it more acceptable. It is not. The term translated “observe” (lit. keep watch) is not used in a religious sense elsewhere in the New Testament but since it is linked to special days, it has that sense here. The false teachers may have seen this as a first step toward convincing the Galatians to be circumcised:

Paul probably was reacting to a report he had received concerning the inroads made by the agitators among the Galatian believers. It may be that the special observances mentioned in this verse were a first step in the “higher life” program of the Judaizers. Once they had persuaded the Galatians to submit themselves to such calendrical rituals, then the decisive step of circumcision could be imposed more readily. (George: 317)

As with other schemes to enhance the status of the redeemed, the “higher life” program in reality pointed them back to slavery and bondage. So much so that Paul feared his work among them through the gospel would be to no purpose. He uses an adverb that implies possible wasted efforts.

Paul Appeals to the Galatians as Brothers (Galatians 4:12-14)

“I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong; but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself.” (Galatians 4:12-14)

Paul does not assume that the Galatians have turned back; but the false teachers want them to. He addresses them as “brothers.” They had become part of the gospel family and therefore were blessed. But the lure of a better version of the gospel (i.e., a distorted gospel that could only curse and not bless—Galatians 1:6-9) tempted them to reject their blessed status to go back to their previous status—cursed.

Paul preached the gospel of a crucified Jewish Messiah, the Son of God who

was sent by the Father. This was scandalous since the one ‘hung on a tree’ was cursed. How could the One who brought the new status, blessed of God, be Himself cursed? Because of substitution—He bore the curse for us, the redeemed. Paul could have been mistaken for being cursed, given his weakened condition, whatever it was.

There is an irony here, as I mentioned earlier. Paul’s condition is called a “weakness of the flesh.” The term “weakness” is *astheneia* which probably means “bodily illness” here, as the NASB has it. But in verse 9, Paul calls the *stoicheia* “weak” using the adjective *astheneis* which is a form of the same word. At one point the gospel was more important to them than Paul’s “weakness” whatever it was, but the *stoicheia* are truly “weak and poor.” Why go back to ultimate “weakness” when they had the ultimate blessing? Paul was the “messenger” of God who brought them the gospel, and they believed. Thus they were blessed and had escaped their previous status of being cursed. Would these brothers despise Paul’s weakness and return to the greater weakness of the hostile powers of darkness that once ruled them, perhaps thinking they would escape the apparent “curse” of sickness and poverty? Some today do.

Conclusion

There are only two categories: the blessed and the cursed. The terminology in Galatians chapters 3 and 4 that describe them must be understood in that context. The blessed are the sons of Abraham who have faith, believe the gospel, are indwelt by the Spirit, true heirs, redeemed, brothers, free, and recipients of the promise of God to be a people with Him for all eternity. Their sins are forgiven. The cursed are under the hostile powers of darkness, lost in sin, have broken God’s law, and cannot escape from their horrible, cursed condition but through the gospel. This is true for all. Those are the two categories Paul recognized in Galatians.

Those who seek to enhance their status as Christians by additions from their past, be it Jewish or pagan or a mixture thereof, ironically long for the days of the

bondage to the *stoicheia*. Nothing could be worse. Those who teach Christians to analyze their own sinful past point them to the curse, and never to the blessing. Thus they put their followers into bondage.

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