

Free from the Law! What Does That Mean?

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When I was a boy, our church used to sing a hymn called “Free from the Law, O Happy Condition!” Little did I know that being free from the Law was so important! Here’s a short explanation—a primer so to speak.



Jews Were Under the Law

To start with, Gentiles were actually never under the Law of Moses.

Jewish people knew this well. The Law was a unique gift given to them on Mt Sinai. But through the teaching of Christ and his Apostles the Jews heard the good news that this Mosaic Law of priesthood, circumcision, feast days, sacrifices, temple worship, and hundreds of other ordinances was actually designed to show them the “sinfulness of sin” and to point them to Christ (see Romans 7). In Christ they would be free from the burden and condemnation of the Law, which neither they nor their fathers had actually kept. Sadly, most Jews resisted this notion.

The Jews who did come to Christ became an object lesson for the world. The Law not only prefigured Christ and his atonement, but showed them by experience that their sin was heinous and the Law was impossible to keep. “By the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.” Yet, by coming to Christ, they became true spiritual children of Abraham, a promise they knew all about, but that could only be fulfilled by faith in the Messiah.

Gentiles Were Not Under the Law

Gentiles, like most of us reading this, were not given the Law. The Bible says they were outside of it (Romans 9:4). It was possible for a Gentile to place himself under the Law, however, by being circumcised and essentially becoming a proselyte Jew. But this would only bring judgment, not acceptance by God. The Gentiles, even without the Law, were condemned along with the Jews because of their rejection of the revelation of God in nature, the natural law coming from that, their worship of other gods rather than the one revealed to them, and their failure to give thanks to the true God (see Romans 1:18-32). Jews and Gentiles were equally condemned. Both Jews and Gentiles are in peril. Our Savior was and is desperately needed!

In Galatians, Paul warns Gentile Christians not to make the mistake of putting themselves under the Law as believers as some false teachers were pressing on them. Christ had set them free from the Law and it’s bondage. They need not become Jews first to become a Christian by being circumcised and submitting to the Law. Neither Law-works, or external religious works of any kind, could atone for them — even the kind they knew under pagan religions. Christ alone did what was necessary for forgiveness for Jews and Gentiles alike through his death and resurrection. Faith in Christ was the issue for both: “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26).

How are Jews and Gentiles Saved?

Because Jesus died and was raised again as the reigning Lord, both Jews and Gentiles may be saved from the guilt of their sins. They respond to Christ by faith in him and his saving work. Therefore, to the Christians in Galatia who had a Jewish background, Paul had this to say:

But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified [declared right before God] by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:23-26).

And to the Gentile-background Christians, he declares this wonderful truth and guidance:

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery [by coming under the Law and its religiosity, as in your former pagan rituals]. (Gal 5:1)

This is my simple primer on the Law. Understanding the Law is a key to unlocking several parts of the New Testament.