

## **“Sons of God through Faith”**

**Galatians 3:23-29**

**New Year’s Day + January 1, 2023**

**Dear Friends in Christ,**

**Identity is a big deal today. In national affairs we hear about “identity politics.” People want to be treated, or others want to treat them, on the basis of just one aspect of their lives. They talk about the “soccer mom” vote, the Hispanic vote, the African-American vote, the independent vote. Your identity tells people how you want to be known.**

**What is your identity? How would you, above all, like to be known? When you have a conversation with yourself in your head (or maybe even out loud), how do you address yourself? How would you like, above all, to be remembered by your children and grandchildren? The text before us on this first day of the new year would urge us to consider ourselves first and foremost, as children of God. Even more specifically, in a certain sense, whether we are male or female, we are to consider ourselves “sons” of God. More on that later.**

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**First, let’s go back to the beginning and lay a proper foundation. Our identity may first of all be described as a “captive.” It says, “Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed” (v.23). What is this talking about? First of all, it is a historical account of the way God dealt with sinners. He established His law for the people of Israel and gave it to them on Mount Sinai. The sacrifices and ceremonies put many requirements on people. It controlled even what they could and could not eat and put a curse on anyone who did not keep everything written in the law. But when Christ came, He fulfilled the sacrifices and ceremonies in His own person. He suffered the curse Himself and brought freedom for all who believe in Him.**

**The statement is also true in a personal way. It refers to the time a person is brought to faith in Jesus Christ: “Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed” (v.23). In fact, this is the way it works every day in the life of a Christian. When we hear the Law of God and really take it to heart, it locks us up in a prison. And this is no cushy prison, it is death row! The Law shows us that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and that we deserve nothing**

from God but punishment in this life and the next. When the Law makes us feel and understand how profoundly we have offended our good and righteous Creator, we begin to be terrified of His anger. We acknowledge our misery and damnation. “The conscience is so confined that it cannot find a place in the whole wide world where it can be safe” (Luther’s Works, *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535, p.338).

But God does not desire this terror to continue. His plan is that this misery would lead us immediately to the Lord Jesus and His forgiveness. That is why the law is called a “guardian.” “So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). In the ancient world wealthy people would have a servant whose job it was to conduct a boy or youth to and from school and to oversee his conduct generally. When the youth came of age, the guardian was no longer necessary. His work was temporary. So the Law, leads us to Christ. “The Law is an oppressive guardian but only for a temporary period. The Law’s oppressive, imprisoning role has come to an end in Christ” (A. Andrew Das, *Concordia Commentary: Galatians*, CPH, 2014, p.375). In the same way that hunger will drive us to a good meal, so the law bears down upon us and threatens us and makes us hungry for some way to get rid of the pain in our conscience—in other words, it makes us hungry for Jesus. It does not yet feed us and satisfy our hunger, but leads us to the table. In alternating fashion the Christian experiences both of these in the course of a single day. That is the way this is supposed to work: you hear the Law of God and it makes you feel sorrow over your sins because you know that you have offended God, but then you feel relief to know that your sins are forgiven. As the Lord says here through Paul’s letter, “So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith” (v.24). Without the Law of God showing us the real state of affairs, and how far we have fallen short of God’s standards, we might mistakenly think that we could get right with God by our works.

## --- II ---

The Law shows us that we are sinners, but the Gospel shows us that Jesus is our Savior, our Rescuer, from sin. Instead of being condemned as the Law demands, the Gospel tells us that we are *justified*, declared “not guilty,” through faith. When we trust in Jesus, that He lived and died and rose again for us, to earn righteousness before God for us and to suffer our guilt and

guarantee our salvation, God counts that trust, that faith, as righteousness. “But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise (vv. 25-29). As sinners baptized into Christ, you are clothed with Christ. His righteousness covers your sins. When God looks at you, He sees Jesus. This is our status as long as we keep that faith that was given us in our Baptism.

As children of God who are clothed in Christ, we are entitled to all the rights and privileges thereof. This means that we are an heir. That is no doubt why it emphasizes that, male or female, we are all one in Christ, we are all “sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ.” In the ancient world the sons were definitely favored over the daughters when it came to the matter of the inheritance. But, not so, among God’s children. We all have the full rights. Eternal life is ours, the resurrection of the body and a place in the world to come with Jesus. The Bible even promises us that we will reign with Christ on His throne.

With regard to being heirs, there’s the matter of Abraham. God promised Him that all nations would be blessed through Him—and that is our inheritance. “In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18).

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I’d like to close with a quotation about our identity as baptized children of God. Here’s a quotation from a sermon preached many years by Pastor C.F.W. Walther on New Year’s Day. He is the pastor in St. Louis who helped our forefathers obtain a faithful pastor from Germany. About that time, on New Year’s Day, Pastor Walther preached about Baptism, which is fitting as we mark the day on which our Lord was circumcised. Baptism has taken the place of the Circumcision. Pastor Walther said: “Should the Christian stand all day long at the grave of all joys which he enjoyed in past years? Through Holy Baptism a great stream of joy has been conducted in his heart, which does not drain away, but streams forward with his life until its waves carry him into the sea of a blessed eternity. Should the Christian be reminded all day long that the

flowers of his youth fall more and more? [In other words, is New Year's Day just about lamenting our mortality? No! The Christian] stands planted by God in the water of his Baptism as a palm tree which becomes greener and greener and whose leaves never wither. ...

For Baptism is a bath that washed me not only once when I receive it—washed me pure with Christ's blood—but *it continuously washes me clean even daily for as long as I hold it in faith.*

For just as that same water of the flood drowned the sinners, but Noah with his relatives were brought to salvation and carried to Mount Ararat, so also did the water of my Baptism drown my sins, but my soul was brought to the eternal mountain of divine grace.

And just as once those same waves of the Red Sea, which swallowed up Pharaoh and his army, were a protective wall for Israel, so also has my baptismal water swallowed up all of my damnation and is for me a sure wall before God's wrath and punishment. ...

Now then, all of you who believe in God's Word, let your watchword for entering the new year be this: 'I am baptized!' Although the world may laugh at this comfort,...nevertheless, abandon any other dearly held pledges and speak only throughout the entire year to come, in all terrors of conscience and necessity through sin and death: 'I am baptized! I am baptized! Hallelujah!' And you shall prevail! In every time of need, you will find comfort in your Baptism; on account of it Satan will flee from your faith and confession; and in death you will see heaven opened and will finally come into the joy of your Lord to celebrate a great year of jubilee, a year of praise, with all the angels forever and ever. Amen!" ["Sermon for New year's Day (1845)," in *Licht des Lebens: Ein Jahrgang von EvangelienPredigten* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1905), 90-92, 95. Translated by Jon D. Vieker. Cited in *Treasury of Daily Prayer* (CPH 2008), pp.1077-1078. Emphasis added.]

Fellow sons of God—baptized into Christ, holding the blessings of Baptism by faith—may we all live each day of 2023 in this grace! Amen.