

Galatians 4:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world:

Analysis

Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: Paul applies the illustration. "Even so we" (houtōs kai hēmeis)—just like the child-heir. "When we were children" (hote ēmen nēploi)—in our spiritual minority before Christ. "We" likely includes both Jewish and Gentile believers—both were in spiritual childhood, though differently (Jews under law, Gentiles under pagan religion).

"Were in bondage" (ēmetha dedoulōmenoi, ἦμεθα δεδουλωμένοι)—perfect participle emphasizing enslaved state. "Under the elements of the world" (hypo ta stoicheia tou kosmou) is debated. Stoicheia (στοιχεῖα) can mean "elemental principles," "basic elements" (like earth, air, fire, water), "elementary teachings," or "spiritual powers." Context suggests elementary religious principles—the ABC's of religion, whether Jewish law or pagan ritual. Both systems were "of the world" (tou kosmou)—earthly, external, unable to transform the heart. Both enslaved rather than freed.

Historical Context

Pre-Christ, both Jews and Gentiles were under restrictive religious systems. Jews had Mosaic law with its extensive regulations; Gentiles had pagan cult practices with rituals, sacrifices, and taboos. Paul radically levels them: both were elementary, external systems that enslaved. This was offensive to Jews who saw

their law as divine revelation superior to paganism. Paul insists both left people as children needing maturity that only comes through Christ and the Spirit.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. What elementary religious principles or external rules have you been enslaved to that Christ came to free you from?
2. How do you recognize when you've drifted from mature faith in Christ back to childhood bondage to religious performance?
3. In what ways might contemporary Christianity resemble bondage to worldly elements rather than Spirit-empowered freedom?

Interlinear Text

οὕτως	καὶ	ἡμεῖς	ὅτε	ἡμεν	νήπιοι	ὑπὸ	τὰ	στοιχεῖα
so	Even	we	when	G1510	children	under	G3588	the elements
G3779	G2532	G2249	G3753		G3516	G5259		G4747
τοῦ	κόσμου	ἡμεν	δεδουλωμένοι·					
G3588	of the world	G1510	in bondage					
	G2889		G1402					

Additional Cross-References

Colossians 2:20 (Parallel theme): Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances,

Colossians 2:8 (Parallel theme): Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

Galatians 4:9 (Parallel theme): But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?

Galatians 2:4 (Parallel theme): And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage:

Acts 15:10 (Parallel theme): Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Romans 8:15 (Parallel theme): For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

Matthew 11:28 (Parallel theme): Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

John 8:31 (Parallel theme): Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

Galatians 4:25 (Parallel theme): For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.