

“The Universal Prison House”

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Galatians 3:19-29

But the Scriptures hath “concluded” (imprisoned) all (everything) under sin so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. —v. 22

The word in question here is *synekleisen* (Strong’s #4788) and it is repeated in v. 23 **“concluded” until the coming faith would be revealed.** The word is solemn, striking and “ambiguous” to the English reader. It literally means “shut up” in the literal sense of being shut together, or confined with no means of escape. . . . “According to the Scriptures all men have been subjected to the dominion of sin, and the purpose of God therein was, that the promised salvation should not come from the law, but should be bestowed on believers on account of faith in Christ.” (Meyers) Of course, they cannot be justified by that law which declares them to be guilty, and which condemns them, any more than the Law of the land will acquit a murderer, and pronounce him innocent, at the same time that it holds him to be guilty. (Barnes’ Notes)

“That the promises of life and salvation might be given to those who, according to the new covenant of the gospel, should receive and accept of the Mediator, on the terms of salvation (namely, faith in Christ) which God offers to us in the gospel; where these promises are exhibited *upon the condition of believing*.. . . for until man was *a transgressor by breaking the law*, and violating the first covenant, there was no room for a Mediator, no cause for men’s applying themselves to a Mediator.” (M. Poole)

“And proved, that all the individuals of human nature, Jews and Gentiles, and all that is in them, and done by them, are *under the power and dominion of sin*, defiled by it, and involved in the guilt of it; for it is not “all persons”, but “all things,” belonging to all persons; all the members of their bodies, and faculties of their souls; all their thoughts, inclinations, and intentions; all their works and services, even their best righteousness, which scripture describes “as filthy rags;” *all* are declared to be sinful and polluted, and men, on account of them are *judged to be guilty before God*, and, so, liable to punishment; from whence there can be no escape by the law of works; for they are *like men concluded, or shut up in a prison*, from which there is no apparent likelihood of deliverance: now the Spirit of God, discovering to men this their wretched and desperate condition, under the law and sin, reveals Christ and his righteousness to them, and enables and encourages them to believe in him, by whom only they can be justified from all things, they cannot by the law of Moses, in which they see themselves *shut up, as in a prison*. . . . for though the law has no tendency in itself to bring persons to Christ, and to believe in him for righteousness, yet this **concluding men under sin**, showing them their desperate, and hopeless, and helpless condition, the Spirit of God takes occasion from hence to reveal Christ unto them, and to enable them as perishing creatures to venture on him, and lay hold on the hope set before them in the Gospel; and so they come to enjoy *the grand promise* of it, *even life and salvation by Christ*. (J. Gill)

Concluded under sin is next modified from a dark dungeon and morphed to a heavy weight by Paul. It is Scripture that drives us to *an awareness of guilt* as the fact of human sinfulness is declared over us, over all we are, think and do. Then, as it were, a beam of light falls upon the last words about **concluded: that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe**. Consequently, our common doleful destiny doesn’t inevitably lead to death, or despair; no, rather it is preparatory to a common, blessed salvation!

To make this plainer I wish to draw a comparison between “concluded under sin” and the work of a fowler, *a person who hunts wildfowl, or birds in the wild*. The fowler has to capture the bird—using a net, a snare, or by “liming the branches where birds light” with a sticky, adhesive spread on branches. When the bird lights on the treated branches, it is stuck there and it cannot escape by flying away. When the bird’s mode of escape is eliminated, the fowler may harvest the hapless birds at will. This mode of capture is a lot less noisy than pellets and gunpowder. Now, for the analogy: sin is to the sinner as “liming” is to the wildfowl. The trapped bird may think it can fly away at will, *but it cannot*. The sinner may think he can escape sin at will but he cannot; sin overpowers the will. The addictive power, the allure of sin which cements the practice and habits of sinner leads to him being taken captive by sin, or to be being **concluded under sin . . . imprisoned**. Unless someone comes and rescues him, liberates him from sin *he is stuck unto death*. I think you have the picture even if sinners are precisely like limed birds.

All sin is imprisonment. Yes, it’s like addiction. The addict thinks he is in control and can quit any time he wishes; but he cannot. It is only when he bumps up against powerlessness (as AA phrases it “I admitted that I was powerless against alcohol”) that an openness to rescue appears. Maybe God can do what I cannot and they call that “their higher power.” ***So sinners only escape that prison house through faith in Jesus Christ***.

But people generally aren’t in bondage just to drugs and alcohol. They are imprisoned by their rejection of morality, especially conventional morality. Limed by sin and lust, they become inveterate rule breakers, rebels and “lawless ones.” Proverbs 30:20:

**This is the way of an adulterous woman:
She eats and wipes her mouth,
And says, “I have done no wrong.”**

Sometimes, they pride themselves on being tolerant, so open minded, free thinking and immorally free loving. Frankly, they are not moral, not considerate, or even thoughtful and their “love” consistently borders on narcissism: self-serving idolatry laced with lust, greed and gluttony.

They pretend their lives aren’t trashy and they are deceived when they boast about their “goodness and purity.” It is not trash-talking to describe this as “disgusting.” Are they ignorant or blind? Are they senseless willfully? Is impulsivity a rationale, a valid excuse, or a mask for blatant sin? *It is sad to relate but there are sinners who seem addicted to “filthing” the world . . . spoiling what they can, bringing ruin and desolation to others and they spread defilement at home and abroad.*

Sin is notoriously bigger than the will—the evidence for that is overwhelming. Those who are habituated to evil are evil—they easily cancel any input from their better selves. Or they choose to “just do it,” *especially if they can count on others to justify, or underwrite the consequences*. The tempter is just like Lucy and the football—she suckers Charlie Brown over and over. The house of sin’s detention is a prison, not a glorious flat overlooking the river! And once they take the lease, they can never get out . . . or relocate. Like birds which do not know the limbs are limed, their feet get tangled and they never fly again. The slave of sin, whether caught, or trapped, is shut up just like that.

Then there is the impending doom which attends the incarceration. The bird catcher is coming with his club for harvest his prey. Doom is like a penalty—consequences flow from our free choices. Some are irretrievably costly! ***“All human acts have perpetual consequences,”*** preaches Alexander Maclaren. Our fleeting deeds accumulate like the limestone cliffs of Dover “formed from the skeletal remains of minute planktonic green algae.” Dark streaks run like ribbons across them—the remains of sea sponges and other marine life. “Everything that a man wills, whether it passes into external act or not, leaves, in its measure, ineffaceable impressions on himself.” (Maclaren) So we are not only dungeoned in, but we are freighted with all we do, for good or evil. Like a tortoise, we take it with us. Unless we can come before our Savior, find forgiveness and be set free!

BUT, also, in light of the future waiting for us beyond the grave, as certified by our forebodings and as required by the moral reasonableness of the universe (this, too, is revealed in Scripture), we come at last to the throne of retribution. All our works will be exposed there—in front of perfect and impartial justice—and we shall receive recompense for the balance of it all. And only those who are in Christ shall escape condemnation.

Please note, I did not equate all men in terms of gross transgression. I leveled us all with regard to sin, with regard to everyone falling short of the mark, of perfection—any pollution at all defiles and disqualifies. But that doesn’t mean it’s all the same to God: it is not. Surely no man has ever succeeded at doing well all that his conscience suggests . . . but the conclusion that this is all sin evades us. Crimes, vices and shortcomings, in reference to Him, take on the grave character of sin. It is because we matter to God, it is because we are intimately related to Him—that all that we do, or don’t do makes an impression, for good or ill. David’s ground is safest here: ***Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done evil in Thy sight.*** That true confession often succeeds the words: **Thou are the man.**

Consider the scars left on those we sin against! Oh, but what of the nation David let down, the friend he betrayed, the wife he proved unfaithful to, the wife of another man whom he commandeered . . . he even sinned against his illicit lover *and marrying her did not make it alright. Not even close.* When we sin, it is God who is offended universally, every time. The enormity of that! A little sin will still defile. It’s lime on the limb. The scarred are “collateral” damage.

What about the guardian of this place? This prison house of sin? What if “The one great purpose of Scripture is to convince us that we are sinful in God’s sight?” (Maclaren) All of the ceremonial and moral law of Israel served the end of demarcating right from wrong, good from evil.

We all need that external standard of conviction *for, alas, we no longer host that standard within our hearts.*

Yes, there is the conscience that guides you in moral deliberations; but as you change, your conscience changes with you. Your whole state determines, or defines your conscience. The worse you are the more you need it and the less you have it! We numb our conscience by our sinning . . . so we need God to speak to us from heaven, or from his word, or from a faithful friend, saying, “Thou art the man.” We need the shock, a jump start if our conscience has flatlined. Lest you fall back on your complacency, your levity and light heartedness. We find it very hard to take stock in a forthright and honest manner. We coddle ourselves, and dwarf our moral being. We build up a barrier between God and us, between us and others; we actually take

God's grace for granted by refusing to face the facts of our actual, unvarnished condition. Omnipotent grace and love must visit us and assault the citadel of our self-righteousness. "Until we have laid to our hearts our personal sinfulness we cannot even begin to fathom the true meaning of the Gospel, or of redemption, or love, or the work of His dear Son.

It is not the social benefits of Christianity, the spiritual health and blessings that frame our faith! No, the Gospel is addressed to sinful men and the way to gain is that of the penitent. When we are ready to cast ourselves fully, and completely on the mercies of God, we have reached the starting line of comprehending our faith. Move a little closer than **all have sinned** and admit, ***I am chief sinner amongst them.*** *Move away from abstract generalities, and approach the confessional specificity of "I have sinned against the Lord."*

Our stern treatment by God—yes, let's admit that it is stern and demanding!— is *a precursor to tenderest love*. We are shut up . . . to apprehend our sin and then to welcome the advent of our deliverance. Forgiveness is the lime solvent which unsticks us! And, if we can hear it, sometimes the lime, in stopping us, stops our sinning more. Sometimes, the lime affixes us to the treatment table in the operating room where life-saving surgery transpires!

We learn our true state to render us more eager for deliverance, with greater longing and fuller desire. The prison house is hunger sauce to salvation! Only the most superficial folk will think Christianity is gloomy, harsh and misanthropic! It speaks truth and that is what matters—not whether we find them pleasing, or pleasant. Prisoners, know you have no way out *other than Jesus*. Then you can hear his proclamation of liberty to the captives, the opening of prison doors. Then you can rejoice in the summary elimination of sin, death and hell . . . in power, guilt and penalty. The doors are torn away, bars are broken asunder and fetters have been unlocked and removed.

If the power that may cleanse the most polluted among us has been loosed in the world, then we can reach out our trembling hands and take the gift. If he has set the oppressed free, we should go free . . . get up, go out and be free!

Amen.