

Galatians 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Galatians chapter 3 O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this.

Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by the hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain, if indeed it was in vain?

Does he who supplies the Spirit to you, and works miracles among you, do so by the works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Know then, that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, In you shall all the nations be blessed.

So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse. For it is written, Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.

[1 : 0 6] Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for the righteous shall live by faith. But the law is not of faith, rather, the one who does them shall live by them. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

For it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree, so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith.

To give a human example, brothers, even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, And to offsprings, referring to many, but referring to one, and to your offspring, who is Christ.

God is more than one, but God is one.

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not, for if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

[2 : 3 8] Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

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 no male and 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. In the previous chapter, Paul continued to emphasize the divine origin of his message, a point that he had introduced at the opening chapter of the book of Galatians.

In chapter 2, he had described his confrontation with Cephas at Antioch, when he and others withdrew from fellowship with Gentiles on account of the circumcision party. Having recounted the argument that he made against Cephas at that time, at the beginning of chapter 3, he now turns to the Galatians to bring its full force to bear upon them.

[3 : 46] He has already expressed his dismay at them in chapter 1, but now he is even more impassioned. The fact of the cross, the great truth whose force Paul has been at such pains to drive home to the Galatians when he was with them, seems to have been forgotten by them.

It is in the event of the cross that the grace of God is made known, and it is in that event that lives like Paul's are completely refounded. Out of the work of the cross flows the gift of the Spirit, yet the Galatians, having received the Spirit apart from the law, by simply hearing and believing the message of the cross, now seem to be turning away from the cross to the law.

They are turning back from the new age of the Spirit to the old age of the flesh. And Paul wants to know from them whether, in their experience, God gives the gift of the Spirit by Torah observance, or by hearing the message of the cross by faith.

If the blessing of the Spirit was received entirely apart from living as observant Jews, why do they think that they now need to live in this way? The gift of the Spirit is not given according to Torah observance, but to faith, whether from Jews or Gentiles.

The Apostle Peter and the other leaders had learned this lesson back in the book of Acts, in Acts chapter 10 verses 44 to 48. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word, and the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

[5 : 21] Then Peter declared, Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

And then in Acts chapter 11 verses 17 to 18. If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?

When they heard these things they fell silent, and they glorified God saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life. And finally in Acts 15 verses 8 to 11.

And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

Now therefore why are you putting God to the test, by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

[6 : 21] The leaders of the apostolic church discovered that God wasn't accepting Gentiles on the basis of their becoming proselytes and living as Jews, but as Gentiles marked out, not by Torah observance, but by faith.

Now it's important for us to understand that living as a Jew wasn't something so much that people did to earn salvation. It was rather a status that they enjoyed. Part of the scandal of the cross though, was that God's grace cut directly across the presumed status that the Jews enjoyed and brought grace to the Gentiles on an equal footing.

And the rest of the chapter explains the logic of all of this. If the grace of God in the death of Christ and the gift of the Spirit is not given according to Jewish identity and Torah observance, we immediately face the question of how we are to make sense of the marking out of the Jews as the natural descendants of Abraham and the giving of the law to them.

One can imagine the Judaizers, Paul's opponents, emphasizing the importance of the law in the Old Testament narrative. They could talk about statements that Jesus had made about not abolishing the law but fulfilling it.

They could present Torah observance as the proper shape of Christian obedience. The gift of the Torah at Sinai was the establishment of a covenant bond with the nation and teasing covenant apart from the Torah would seem nigh impossible.

[7 : 40] It shouldn't be difficult to feel the persuasive force that such an argument might have had. And Paul's response is to show how the grace of God in Christ, apart from the law, is fitting, not simply dispensing with the earlier story but bringing it to an appropriate climax.

Paul makes his case by providing a reading of the story, the story from Abraham onwards, one that presents his reading of the Gospel as a fitting denouement. Paul doesn't give a complete answer to the questions that might be raised here, but he does give a response that clarifies a very great deal.

He takes his starting point with the way that Abraham, the father of Israel, was marked out by faith as one in good covenant standing with God, an event that occurred prior to circumcision or the advent of the law way back in Genesis chapter 15 verses 4 to 6.

It wasn't through Torah observance that Abraham was in good standing with God, but through belief in a promise that was given to him.

Those defined by faith rather than by Torah observance are defined by the very same thing as defined the father of the Jews, Abraham. And indeed, the blessing of the Gentiles was announced in advance to Abraham when, at his call, he was told that all of the nations would be blessed in him.

[9 : 16] Paul goes so far as to describe this as preaching the Gospel beforehand to Abraham. The Gospel is the declaration of the reign of Christ, a declaration of which an international people is an intrinsic element.

Those who are defined by faith are not just like Abraham. They are the sons of Abraham, the man of faith, and they are blessed along with him. However, by contrast with those marked out by Abraham-like faith, those who depend upon Torah observance for their standing with God are under a curse.

The law held out a curse over the unfaithful. The point of the Torah wasn't perfect spotless obedience. It made provision for atonement. But the Torah did require observance, and Israel had failed in that observance.

The law considered in and of itself was never the foundation of right standing before God. Habakkuk chapter 2 verse 4 declared that the righteous shall live by his faith. The logic of right standing with God is one of promise and trust.

But the law, however, operated according to the principle of receipt of the law and observance of it. The law had not brought Israel into the blessing of right standing with God at all.

[10 : 27] Quite the opposite. It had brought Israel under the curse. Right standing with God had always depended upon a logic extrinsic to the law. Throughout the Old Testament itself, we can see this.

Whether in sacrifice, which is a sort of enacted prayer, or in prophecy, Israel looked to something beyond the law to deliver them from the judgment that the law itself placed them under.

In books like Deuteronomy, after laying out the law, Moses makes clear that the law will end up bringing its devastating curse upon Israel. It will only be through the promised intervention of God, an intervention received by faith, that Israel would be delivered from the predicament that the law brought them into.

For Paul, the cross of Christ is that which deals with the crisis of the curse of the law. It was by the cross that the Lord had redeemed Israel, not by or according to Israel's own Torah observance.

Having dealt decisively with the curse at the cross, the blessing of Abraham could be given to the Gentiles, and the promise of Abraham could be received by faith. To understand part of what Paul has in mind here, we should probably think back to the call of Abraham and what lay in the backdrop of it, the story of Babel.

[11 : 40] The building of Babel, this great city and a tower, was an attempt to make people's name great. It was an attempt to forge a great and a powerful human solidarity so that people would not be scattered abroad.

It was an attempt to build a tower uniting heaven and earth. But as a result of this, the nations are divided by a curse. But then God calls this man called Abraham in the next chapter, and he promises to make Abraham's name great.

As we work through the story of Abraham, we see an alternative to the Tower of Babel. There is a ladder leading from heaven to earth, a ladder that Jacob sees at Bethel.

There's also the promise of a new human solidarity, a solidarity that's formed through blessing. If the nations were formed through a curse, there is going to be the blessing of the nations through Abraham.

God is going to provide an alternative to Babel. This is the implicit promise of Abraham, and this is fulfilled by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. That's why Paul connects the gift of the Spirit and the promise given to Abraham, because these two things belong together in a proper understanding of the story.

[12 : 50] At Pentecost, there is a conduit forged between heaven and earth. Christ ascends and the Spirit comes down, and there's this union between heaven and earth forged. There's a union of people from every tribe, people, tongue, and nation, as people declare in many different tongues the glorious works of God.

Languages once divided at Babel are now brought together in a unified testimony to the glory of God. All of this fulfills the promise to Abraham, and the fact that this occurs, as it clearly does in the book of Acts, without people being circumcised and observing the law, reveals that Torah observance is not the basis upon which we stand in right relationship with God.

One does not need to be a Jew to be a member of God's new people. This purpose and promise right there at the beginning of the history of Israel in the call of Abraham cannot be annulled or undermined by anything that comes later.

The promise was always made to Abraham and his seed, seed being singular. The promise wasn't to a number of different families of Abraham, but to one people of Abraham, a single seed.

The envisaged seed was always a Jew and Gentile reality, one in which there was no division between the two. God gave this inheritance in the form of a promise. If God had later given the law in a way that added lots of terms and conditions and small print to the promise, it would have hollowed out and denied and negated the promise.

[14 : 13] The question then naturally arises though, what was the purpose of the law then? And Paul turns to this question in verses 19 to 20. For Paul, the law plays a subsidiary and temporary role.

He foregrounds the parts played by the angels and the intermediary Moses, and this downplays its finality and its character as direct divine gift. The role of the angels at Sinai is also discussed elsewhere in the New Testament.

In Acts chapter 7 verse 53, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. And in Hebrews chapter 2 verses 2 to 3, for since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

It doesn't bring about the unity that was awaited. For Paul, this is a unity mysteriously witnessed to in the core confession of Israel's faith, the Shema of Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The law didn't bring the oneness of a united seed, a seed united in fellowship with each other and in fellowship with God. Rather, the law was characterized by intermediation, which brings parties together while holding them apart.

[15 : 30] It did not bring about the communion with God characterized as sonship and it also served to divide Jews from Gentiles. And there's something unfitting about a God who is one and yet has divided peoples.

The law then was more provisional. It wasn't there to set terms upon the promise. It was added because of transgressions, Paul says, an expression whose meaning is not immediately clear.

This is a statement whose meaning will probably need to be discerned from a broader acquaintance with Paul's theology. Perhaps it means that the law served to bring sin to light, to smoke it out into the open.

And it achieved this by bringing righteousness to light, by silhouetting in prohibitions the form of life characteristic of the spirit. It mostly revealed life negatively by exposing the death and the judgment that it outlined in its prohibitions.

The law never could bring about the life that it revealed and it ended up dealing curse and death to a people who could not live within its strictures. Within the tabernacle, the temple and the sacrificial system, the law did provide a structure within which God was present in a highly bounded way in the midst of a sinful people and it presented some way of approach but in the process it revealed the scale of the gulf and it could not overcome this gulf.

[16 : 48] The judgment that the law brought Israel under placed all humanity on a sort of equal footing. Even as Israel enjoyed a privileged proximity to the Lord and unique benefits as a nation formed through blessing, it ended up under the curse like the Gentiles.

In the end, one way or another, everyone found themselves ending up under the power of sin so that when the promise came it could be received on equal terms too. For Israel, the law was like a guardian for a child during the period of its minority.

It placed some bounds upon their sin and it also served a teaching function. The law came with blessings and curses, much as a child needs to be taught by external rewards or punishments.

For those who meditated upon the law and delighted in it, the law served to direct them to the way of faith and love. It revealed the limits of its own observance as a basis for standing with God, but also how it would be fulfilled in love for and faith in the gracious, promising God.

However, for most, it ended up bringing curse and a sort of imprisonment. It restricted their willfulness, but it also revealed their willfulness and placed them under punitive measures.

[17 : 59] This was all provisional, though, precisely in order to prepare people for and lead to Christ. Now, however, faith has come. Faith is the principle of a new way of life, something that flows from Christ by the work of his Spirit.

By faith, we have right standing with God on the foundation of grace. And although Paul does not discuss it at this point, faith also produces a new way of life, a way of life characterized by the law of God written upon our hearts.

The gift of the law at Sinai is juxtaposed with the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. One of the principal results of all of this is that we now have unity with God and unity with others, both of which the law restricted.

The law divided Jews from Gentiles and also held God and man at safe distances from each other. However, now we enjoy sonship and fellowship with God through faith, a standing received as a gracious gift through God's gift of his Son.

The promised seed to Abraham is realized in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit. While circumcision divided Jew from Greek and male from female, baptism is a sign of union.

[19 : 11] It unites us to Christ and it unites us to each other. baptism is not miraculous, working apart from faith. Rather, just as a wedding formally unites two people in their love and a wedding with no love is a charade, so baptism brings us into a union that is lived out in and on the basis of faith.

It's not magic and it doesn't negate the necessity of faith. Rather, it presents to our faith the blessings of sonship that have been given to us. It is founded in Christ's own faithfulness in his death and resurrection and it's lived out in our answering faith.

In baptism, we formally enter into union with Christ. We put on Christ as Paul puts it here. Henceforth, our very bodies, the root of ourselves, our bodies which exist prior to our agency, our volition or our subjectivity, they're defined by Christ.

In baptism, we are all buried with Christ so that we might be raised with him. Baptism also unites us with all of the other people who have been baptised as a united people in the church that baptism marks out whatever our background and whatever our identity.

In this new people, old divisions, like the divisions the Gentiles were re-erecting by turning to the law, are overcome and we all become one. Modern readers tend to read verse 28 as a statement about equality or even in some cases interchangeability and this does not quite grasp Paul's point.

[20 : 38] Paul's point is not the equality of detached individuals with varying characteristics but a declaration of the unity of formally opposed or alienated groups in a new solidarity.

While there are some clear senses in which a form of equality follows from this, where all recipients of the promised Holy Spirit and stand on the same ground of grace before God for instance, it is not an axiomatic equality, a radically generalisable equality, nor yet an equality that renders people interchangeable.

Paul's point is not that human beings have always been equal. Rather, his point is relative to this event of God in Christ. Those things that would once divide us no longer define our existence and have ceased to be the barriers that they once were.

The result of all of this is not a lot of detached and equal individuals, but various and differing members of a single and undivided family. This new family in Christ is the fulfilment of the promise that was made to Abraham.

A question to consider. Paul's argument in this chapter is founded upon an extensive reading of and reflection upon the history of redemption. He isn't making general statements about an abstract way of salvation.

[21 : 55] He is rather exploring the way that God has acted in history and expressing the force of the implications that that has for the Galatians at that moment in time. If you were challenged to retell the underlying story that Paul explores in this chapter in your own words, how would you go about doing it?