

## **Promises to Abraham and their Relation to Gentiles in the Church: a Study of Galatians, Chapter 3**

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### Abstract

Perhaps one of the most foundational aspects of Pauline theology is the unification of both Jews and Gentiles in Christ by faith. For first-century Jewish believers this raised the question of how the unity of their shared justification with the Gentiles in Christ through faith proceeded from both the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic Law. Namely, how can Gentiles who are not physical descendant of Abraham become heirs to promises YHWH made to him. Central to this question is the purpose and efficacy of the Law. These questions left early believers to debate whether Gentiles both needed to keep the Law to be justified.

Using a biblical-theological approach this paper will argue that in his letter to the Galatian Church Paul presents the supremacy, centrality, and sufficiency of Christ as these answer to these questions. To support this argument this article provides a careful examination of Paul's use of the Old Testament, his rhetoric, and use of language. This paper concludes that from Paul's perspective Christ is both the true heir of Abraham and the only true Law-keeper and that the gift of the Holy Spirit is the par excellence proof of Paul's claim that both Jews and Gentiles are justified solely through faith in the Messiah apart from the Law.

**Keywords:** Galatians, Law, Faith, Pauline Theology, Soteriology, Justification

## **Daring to be Unlawful: Paul and the Spirit of Faith.**

### **Galatians 3:2**

Following his greeting in chapter one, Paul wastes no time in getting to the point of his letter to the Galatians: a rebuke of the Galatian church for their exchange of orthodoxy for heterodoxy. According to Paul, the Galatian church as a body began well in joyfully embracing Christ and trusting in him for justification. In chapter two Paul states that they received the gift of the Spirit as a result of belief in Christ (Galatians 3:2). But it appears from the content of the letter that the Galatians have forsaken this orthodoxy and have heeded false teaching on the need to keep the Law for justification. It appears they have shifted from a belief that their justification and the indwelling Spirit came solely from faith in Christ as the one who fulfilled the Law, to a belief that that these things come as a result of personal adherence to the Mosaic Law. According to Paul, the Galatians have been tempted by some unknown teacher (perhaps the party of the circumcision to which Peter fell victim in 2:11) to a practice of keeping the Jewish Law, hoping to become inheritors of Abraham's blessings through the Law. In chapter 2, Paul challenges this thinking. Via his own biography, Paul states that his message did not come from men but from God. He defends it on the basis that it has been verified by all the Apostles. These apostles, the "pillars of the church", have affirmed that Paul's Gospel is orthodox. Because the Gospel preached by Paul states that justification could not come through keeping the Law ( Gal 2:15-21) but only through the substitutive sacrifice of Christ for sin, the Galatian believers have accepted a distorted form of the Gospel and have left the path of true faith.

## **Paul's Rhetorical Response to the Galatians**

### **Galatians 3:5-6**

To prove his point Paul argues in detail that it is through faith, not the Law, that one receives justification. He states that it has been so from the Old Covenant's inception with Abraham

(Galatians 3:5-6). Through rhetorical questioning, Paul argues that the Spirit, as evidenced by miraculous happenings among them, has come to them through Christ and not through the Law. Presuppositional to this claim is the fact that the Spirit was promised to the offspring of Abraham, the Jews, as part of the New Covenant promises (Jeremiah 31:31-3; Ezekiel 36:26-7). Paul begins a theological argument that it is faith in Jesus, the Messiah and ultimate heir of the Abrahamic covenant, that qualifies one as a spiritual child of Abraham and, by proxy, an heir of the spiritual promises given to him. Paul contends that it is not adherence to the Law (e.g. circumcision) that qualifies one as a spiritual descendant of Abraham.

From this beginning, Paul builds a case delineating exactly how Christ relates to the Law, and how the Law relates to the Gospel. Paul will argue that, because promises to Abraham were intended for fulfillment in Christ, those who are in Christ by proxy become beneficiaries of those promises and the true heirs of Abraham.

### **Paul's Rhetoric and the Jewishness of the Gospel Galatians 3:6**

Paul is a Jew, and his intended audience in Galatia, though largely Gentile, seem to understand the Jewishness of the Gospel. It is perhaps because of the Gospel's Jewish origin that the Galatian church has been persuaded to embrace the false teaching that keeping the Jewish Law is a necessary step in receiving justification from Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. In essence, they have been persuaded that, if they are to receive the benefit of the New Covenant promised to Jews, the descendants of Abraham, they must embrace the Law to become inheritors of these spiritual blessing to Abraham.

Knowing of their erroneous attempts to use the Law to qualify themselves as heirs of Abraham, Paul launches a theological attack on a faulty presupposition in the false teacher's arguments. This faulty presupposition is that it was Law-

keeping which justified Abraham and through which YHWH's promises were passed on to Abraham's children. Paul, in quoting Genesis 15:6, shows this to be fallacious. Paul emphasizes that it was faith that justified Abraham even before the giving of the Law or circumcision. Paul compounds this statement with the contention that it is faith that makes one a descendant of Abraham and thereby a beneficiary of his covenant blessings (Galatians 3:7). If the Galatians were attempting, by keeping the Law, to buy a share in the promises given to Abraham, Paul demonstrates that the above misguided presupposition is driving the attempt. According to Paul, it is by faith in Christ that one benefits from these blessings and not by keeping the Law.

### **Sharing Abraham's justification**

#### **Galatians 3:7-9**

Because the promises to Abraham in Genesis 15 are tied to the promise of physical descendants, Paul anticipates that his theological opponents will take issue with his statement that faith makes one a descendant of Abraham. While the Old Testament had ample provision for Gentiles to become proselytes through circumcision and join the descendants of Abraham in the covenant community (Exodus 12:48-49), Paul argues that simply being part of the covenant community did not secure justification nor legal status as a descendent of Abraham regarding his blessings. Paul implies that, for all of Abraham's descendants, justification was given based on faith, just as it was given to Abraham based on faith (Galatians 3:6-8). The implication of Paul's statement is that, under the Old Covenant, there were those within the covenant community of Israel who received justification based on faith and there were those who did not receive justification based on their unbelief. Thus, neither justification nor lack of justification came through keeping the Law. Just as it was to Abraham, justification continued to be provided based on faith. So, though circumcision bound one to the community of those who were physically descended from Abraham, it neither justified

nor entitled one to Abrahamic promises. Instead, just as right standing and promises were given to Abraham because his faith, those who would benefit from these promises must do so by faith in Messiah as the heir of those promises.

### **Jews, Gentiles, and Shared Justification**

Having begun in 3:7 to equate having faith with being a son of Abraham, Paul continues this theme through verse 9. In verse 8, Paul states that God's intention from the inception of his covenant with Abraham was that blessing would come to all the nations through Abraham. Paul, with a discussion of the Law and its relation to Christ in verses 10-14, will demonstrate that it was always the God's intention that faith be the basis for being an heir of these promises of justification and blessing. Verses 7-9 speak of the same body of people from different aspects. Verse 7 introduces Abraham as the father of those who believe. Verse 8 clarifies that, from the beginning of God's promises to Abraham it was God's intention that this fatherhood through faith extend beyond Abraham's physical descendants to include Gentiles. Verse 9 affirms that Abraham's blessings are shared by those who believe. Together, the three verses refer to a single group of people: those who believe, who are heirs of Abraham's promises and who receive the benefits of faith alongside him.

As Paul will argue in verse 17, the above statement was not altered by the giving of the Law, as the Law did not secure one's relationship to the Abrahamic promises. Rather, as I will discuss below, the Law was provided to lead those under it to trust in Messiah as the promised justifier. From this point of view, Paul will argue that those who are now in Christ no longer require the Law's tutelage.

## **Paul and the Purpose of the Law**

### **Galatians 3:10-13**

Paul presented in verses 7-9 that faith is the true determiner of sonship to Abraham and the way in which the promises given to Abraham are received. In verses 10-14, Paul shifts his angle of argumentation, exposing the insufficiency of the Law to accomplish what the Galatians are hoping it will accomplish, securing their righteous standing before God. Paul's motivation in arguing from multiple angles may be to defeat all anticipated counter-evidence posed by his opponents on the ground in Galatia.<sup>1</sup>

Paul's first purpose in discussing the Law is to demonstrate the Law's inability to justify (3:21). He accomplishes this by distancing the giving of the Law to Moses from the justification of Abraham by faith. With the exactness of the figure of 430 years (3:17), Paul encourages the Galatians to meditate upon the time gap between God's covenant with Abraham and justification by faith and YHWH's covenant with the nation of Israel at Sinai where the Law was given. This gap provides evidence that God's pronouncement of blessing and faith on Abraham was not originally in connection to the Law. It also begs the question as to what purpose the Law had if it could not justify.

The second purpose of Paul in discussing the Law is to clarify its role in the purposes of God. Paul states that the Law found purpose not in justifying, but in guiding and teaching the nation of Israel to a point of maturation (3:24). Paul likens the Law to a *paidagōgós*, a slave in a household given the role of guiding the male children of the household until they are mature.<sup>2</sup> A *paidagōgós* was to instruct and guide the young heir in a household until he was ready to assume responsibility for

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<sup>1</sup> J. Louis Martyn. *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible; v. 33A. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, 330.

<sup>2</sup> *BDAG*, s.v. *paidagōgós*.

his role. Until the heir reached maturity, the paidagōgós had authority over the heir, but once the heir reached maturity, the authoritative role of the paidagōgós was complete. His authority ceased and his services were no longer needed.

Thus, Paul argues that the Law found its purpose as a paidagōgós, preparing the nation for maturity in Christ. It taught the nation their need for a justifier by leading it to a recognition of the sinfulness of humanity (3:22-23). The Law demonstrated both the costliness of sin and the need for justification. Paul states that the purpose of the Law was not justification but was to lead those under the Law not only to a recognition of sin, but to Messiah so that they might be justified by faith, just as Abraham was justified (3:24-25). However, at the time Paul was writing to the Galatians, the Messiah had come and the community of faith, the ones who had embraced Messiah by faith, had already been justified by that faith. Paul argues that those of this community of faith no longer need the Law as a paidagōgós. The purpose of the Law was to train the nation to a recognition of sin and of Messiah as the justifier. Because the Galatians had already recognized their sin separation from God and embraced Messiah through faith, they do not need the Law to lead them.

### **The Jews and Gentiles: Freedom and Blessing Galatians 3:14**

In verse 13 Paul uses the Greek pronoun hēmeis ‘we’ in an exclusive manner to draw a distinction between himself and his fellow Jews from the Gentiles nations of which the Galatians are part. Though many translations restate Christòs hēmās exēgórāsen ‘Christ delivered us’ from verse 13 in verse 14 to clarify the grammatical relation of the two hina purpose clauses in verse 14, there is no discrete statement of ‘we’ in verse 14. Because of the grammatical relationship of the hina clauses, we can assume that in verse 14 Paul is still referencing the pronoun in verse 13. Given this, the most likely referent in context of ‘we’ in the discussion of the Law would be the Jewish

people. Because the Galatian audience is not ethnically Jewish, it is likely that Paul is using the phrase to reference his own ethnicity and culture in contrast to the Galatians, who are Gentiles and have no ethnic or cultural ties to the Mosaic Law.

Verse 3:14 functions within Paul's argument to explain the relationship of the Jewish and Gentile communities to the Law and the promises of Abraham. In verses 10-14, Paul explains that the Law brought a curse upon the nation, which was borne by Messiah. It was through bearing this curse that Christ freed those who received him as Messiah by faith from the curse brought by the Law. As I discussed above, the purpose of the Law was to expose and compound the sinfulness of sin. Because the Law itself could not justify, it was not a blessing freeing the nation from sin, but a curse demonstrating and emphasizing the costliness of sin. Under the Old Covenant, if Gentiles wished to exercise faith and join this community, they needed to come under the curse of the Law in becoming proselytes. Paul clarifies in these verses that, because Christ took this curse upon himself, the Gentiles need not go the route of adopting the Law and becoming culturally Jewish to be part of the covenant community.

Two purpose clauses signaled by *hina* occur in verse 14. I take the first to indicate a purpose for which Christ redeemed the Jews from the curse of the Law. This purpose was that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles. Paul uses this first clause to indicate that, through the action of redeeming Jews from the curse of the Law, Christ enabled Gentiles to receive the blessings of Abraham. Paul may be indicating that one event, Messiah's cursed death, accomplished two purposes. It freed Jews from the curse of the Law because it completed the work of Messiah, to whom the Law was leading the nation. It also opened a road for the Gentiles to receive the promised benefit of Abraham's blessing. That Gentiles through faith in Messiah may experience the justification experienced by Abraham through faith and to a portion of his promised blessing. I take the second *hina* clause to indicate a further

clarification of the ultimate purpose of statement in the previous clause. Paul is stating that the ultimate purpose of Christ's enablement of Abrahamic blessings to flow to the Gentiles is that they too, along with the Jews, might receive the promise of the Spirit. Paul is stating that, because the promise of the Holy Spirit was given to the nation of Israel, Christ's death had the dual purpose of both freeing Israel from the curse of the Law and providing the Gentiles a means of receiving the promised Spirit. As Paul stated in 3:2-3, the Galatians had already experienced the blessing of the Spirit, which Paul takes to be evidence that they received this through faith in Christ and not through keeping the Law. Thus, they had experienced firsthand the results of the syllogism presented by Paul. Because they had faith in Christ the ultimate heir of the Abrahamic blessing, they were by proxy heirs of the promised Spirit.

### **Fitting together Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants.**

Paul discusses covenants in 3:15-18 to further prove that the Mosaic covenant and the giving of the Law do not alter the previous covenant between God and Abraham. It was in the covenant made with Abraham that God in the scriptures declared Abraham's justification by faith. Paul's point is that, because this covenant has been ratified, it cannot be altered nor set aside. He illustrates this from human covenants which are binding and implies that a covenant made by God is even greater in weight and scope.

### **The Galatians draw Benefit Through Christ the Seed of Abraham.**

Paul mentions the covenant with Abraham highlighting, in verse 16, the singular nature of "seed" in the original context. To this he ties the promise to Christ, claiming that Christ is the rightful heir of Abraham's promises. If Christ is the rightful heir, then, as Paul argued above, Gentiles can only benefit from these promises through Christ as the heir. If the Galatians have

benefitted from the these promises it must have been through Christ as heir and not the Law which had no power to impart life (3:21).

### **The Mosaic Law vs. the Abrahamic Covenant**

According to Paul in verse 17, the Mosaic covenant cannot and does not invalidate the promises to Abraham given in the previous covenant. According to Paul, the Law was given because of sin; it was a temporary paidagōgōs as I argued above. The Law functioned as a temporary guardian guiding the nation to Messiah and demonstrating the nation's need of Messiah. But the Law's training, according to Paul, did not guarantee inheritance as inheritance was based on the promise to Abraham. To say that becoming an heir of Abraham was contingent upon the Law would be to base the right to heirship on works and not on promise (Galatians 3:18). This would violate YHWH's statements and actions in Genesis 15.

With a discussion of mediation, Paul contrasts the covenant to Abraham with the covenant to the people at Sinai. He gives weight to the Abrahamic Covenant's preeminence by pointing out that it was without mediator.<sup>3</sup> God made the covenant on his own behalf with Abraham. In contrast, the mediated nature of the Mosaic covenant (e.g. through angelic involvement and Moses) demonstrates its subordinate nature to the Abrahamic Covenant.<sup>4</sup> Paul clarifies this lesser status to support his main point that the Law cannot and did not nullify or alter the promises made to Abraham.

### **The Law as Guardian.**

Paul's second stated purpose of the Law is that of a guardian and guide for the Nation of Israel. It is likely that the Law in its

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<sup>3</sup> Terrance Callan, "Pauline Midrash: The Exegetical Background of Gal 3:19b," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no. 4 (1980): 555.

<sup>4</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary; v. 41. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015, 140.

role as paidagōgós defined sin for the nation of Israel.<sup>5</sup> This is in keeping with Paul's statements in Romans 7:7. The Law was useful in that it trapped the nation in their sin, demonstrating for them their inability to live up to its standards and their need for ultimate redemption. In this role, the Law forced the nation to look to future redemption from sin and not entertain thoughts that sin could be dealt with via human effort.

### **Sons of God by Faith.**

In 3:26, Paul uses 'you' to refer to the Galatian believers. Paul's overarching argument is that the Galatian believers became sons of God by faith in Christ, not through keeping the Law. Paul states that the Galatian believers have become heirs of the promise. This promise refers to their justification by faith in Messiah as evidenced by the giving of the Holy Spirit. Because they received the Spirit, they should know they are sons of God. This identity as sons of God has broken down the division of human distinctions. So, unity in Christ is contrasted with social identity and division. This would include outsider identity to the nation of Israel and the covenant to Abraham. Because of their unity with Christ by faith, the Galatians have a new social identity, that of being in Christ, and as result have rights as Abraham's offspring.

### **Conclusion**

Paul's argument dissuading the Galatians from pursuing a path of attempted self-justification based on keeping the Law is clear. Neither Jews nor Gentiles were ever justified by the Law as the Law was not able to justify. Justification, as demonstrated in the life of Abraham, has always been supplied in response to faith. Just as Abraham believed God's promise of Messiah, the Galatians must also seek justification through Messiah. In addition, the blessing of the Spirit is only accessed through faith in Messiah. The Law was never meant to bring the

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner. *Galatians*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament ; v. 9. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010, 240.

Abrahamic blessing but rather lead the nation to the one who would secure it. Just as Jews could not become heirs of the blessing via keeping the Law, neither can Gentiles. Both become heirs of Abraham's blessing in the same way: through faith in Messiah, the true heir of Abraham.

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