

Reflections on Galatians

Galatians 3:1-14

“The Righteous Shall Live by Faith”

These promises to Abraham were made before the law was introduced. Indeed it was some 430 years later that the law was given to Moses. Paul argues that the law, given later, cannot eradicate or replace the promises to Abraham.

Having said all this, Paul now feels it necessary to come to the defence, as it were, of the law. The law was, after all God-given, it was God's good and holy law.

So Paul asks why then was the law given, if it could not save anyone, wondering if perhaps the law was contrary to God's promise.

The answer, for Paul, is clear: it was God's law, so it cannot be bad, or contrary to God's greater purposes.

The law had a very definite and important task. The law acted as a gaoler, whose purpose was to bind everything, to expose sin in all its forms, to limit sin, and to pronounce God's judgement, until Jesus Christ should come and people would be freed from the law by faith in him.

This is the heart of Christian freedom, free not to sin, not to indulge one's own selfishness, but free to love, worship and serve God, apart from the burden of the law.

Next week we will see how Paul changes the metaphor of the law from being a gaoler to being a guardian or manager, and appeals to the Galatians both on the basis of their prior good relationship, and on the basis of the law itself.



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Having established his authority, and the uniqueness of the gospel, and having demonstrated how he defended the gospel in the face of hypocrisy, Paul now challenges the Galatians with regard to their own willingness to compromise the gospel and adopt Jewish legal practices. His challenge: did you receive the Holy Spirit by works or by faith?

Paul appeals to the experience of Abraham, reasoning the primacy of God's promise to Abraham, over the demands of the law, arguing that the law imprisoned people until faith was revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul argues that righteousness is established by faith and not by obeying the law, and that the law was a gaoler keeping God's people imprisoned until Christ should come.

Last week we saw that Paul's refusal to compromise the gospel led him in to dispute with Peter and Barnabas, and with the circumcision party. Paul realised that the claim to righteousness by faith, must exclude any attempt to obey the law as a means to enhance, or supplement, faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Paul's direct call from God gave him the authority to reject all claims contrary to the gospel he preached.

In chapter three, we see how Paul develops his argument, moving away from asserting his own authority, and on to the experience of the Galatian Christians themselves.

Paul is astonished that the Galatians had been so quick to compromise the gospel. He considers them foolish, or even perhaps bewitched.

The truth of Christ, the simplicity of the gospel, had been made clear to them. It had first been set out in scripture, and the subsequent events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection were undeniable facts.

Paul challenges the Galatians to look to their own experience, asking “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?”

This is, of course, a rhetorical question, Paul knows the answer. The Galatians did not receive the Spirit by obeying the law, no one does, that is not the promise. Rather, they received the Holy Spirit, when they first put their faith in Jesus Christ, as their Lord and their Saviour.

It is pure foolishness, in Paul’s eyes, to suppose that having freely been given the greater gift, the Holy Spirit, as a response to faith, that the Galatians should now suppose that the lesser gifts, would come as a result of their own hard work - from the flesh, as Paul puts it.

Again, Paul asks “does he who supplies the Spirit ...,” does he “who works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith,” and again the answer is undeniable - it is through faith.

It is by faith that the Galatians received the Holy Spirit, and continued to receive him, and it is by faith that God worked miracles among them.

That is what was promised to Abraham, and Paul now moves on from these personal challenges to consider Abraham, and his experience.

In the Old Testament, we read that God made several promises to Abraham. Promises that by normal events would seem impossible, and incredible; but, we are told, that in spite of the improbability of the things he had been told, “Abraham believed God...,” and that made all the difference.

Abraham looked at himself, looked at his wife Sarah, looked at the world around him, and seeing the impossibility of all that had been promised, he nevertheless held God to be trustworthy, and believed in all that he had been told.

And God counted it as righteousness.

One of the great promises that God made to Abraham, was that the gentiles would be “justified by faith,” and that in him “all nations would be blessed.”

The only way, Paul said, that anyone can come in to the benefits of the promises made to Abraham, was to emulate Abraham’s faith. It is “those who are of faith” who are “blessed along with Abraham,” who in turn “the man of faith.”

It was faith not works, faith and not the law, that brings a person into that state of being blessed by God. The law couldn’t do it.

Paul goes further, quoting Deuteronomy, to say that the law is a curse, and that not keeping the law leads to being cursed. Paul’s reasoning of course, being that no one keeps the law perfectly, and that therefore all people are cursed by it. If that is the case, Paul argues, no one can be saved by trying to obey the law.

Paul goes on, quoting now from Habakkuk, to stress again that the “righteous shall live by his faith,” and since the law is not faith, the law cannot save.

Then, as if this were not enough, Paul introduces the person and work of Christ. Christ who became a “curse for us,” that is who took upon himself the curse due to each of us as a consequence of our sins, and bore that curse in his death on the cross.

In Christ’s death the law is carried out, it is satisfied, completed. Any further demand for retribution toward us, any payment due, any recompense, as a result of our sin, is now dropped, and we are deemed to be free.

Christ, being himself the sinless Son of God, bore our sin and died - but death could not hold him. Christ rose from the dead, and took hold of all the promises made to Abraham by God, he took them, and holds them on our behalf, and we, by being united with Christ in faith, share in those blessings.