

CHAPTER 3

3:1 to 4:31 Doctrinal: Justification by Faith Alone

This part is the real message of the letter; doctrinal and argued through, from one point to another. In the first part he compared “the gospel of faith” with “the works of the law” in how they relate to justification. Then he explained to them freedom from the law, in Christ; how after a time of slavery the time of being sons with full rights has come. He even showed that those now observing the law are children of the slave woman (Hagar) and those in Christ are children of the free woman (Sarah).

Paul argued the case for remaining faithful to the way of faith, by providing various reasons, some posed as (rhetorical) questions to make them think.

How did you receive the Spirit? (3:1-5)

“[Oh,]¹³ you foolish Galatians!¹⁴ Who has bewitched¹⁵ you?” (v 1). They seem to have “forgotten” that Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. Compare 1 Cor 1:23; 2:2.

Paul’s first argument was experiential. After all, they knew that their faith had brought them countless blessings, so Paul had a clear question to stir their minds about this:

- “Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?” (v 2; see 2:16)
- “Are you so foolish? (v 3)
- After beginning with the Spirit;
- Are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?”
More literal translation: ... trying to be perfected by the ‘flesh’?
The choice is: **Spirit or ‘flesh’** (with its regulations, law and circumcision).
- Did they suffer so much for nothing? (see v 4) Paul couldn’t believe that, couldn’t accept that.]

Repeating the question, now mentioning miracles too, to make them even think more:

- (v 5) “Does God give you his Spirit *and work miracles among you* because you observe the law, or because you believe what you hear?” (responsive faith)

Conclusion: The law could not give the Holy Spirit.

Abraham was justified by faith (3:6-9)

Paul’s second point was Scriptural from the positive example of Abraham. Faith also played an exclusive role in Abraham’s righteousness; his faith “was credited to him as righteousness” (v 6; see Gen 15:6). (*not by the law, as he lived long before that!*)

- “... those who believe are children of Abraham.” (v 7) – *this was difficult to believe by Jews.*
- Abraham in his Gentile state received a promise.
- “... Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith ... ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’” (v 8) (*Scripture personified*)
- “... those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” (v 9)

¹³ Although not translated in NIV, the word ‘Oh’ (like a deep sigh) precedes the sentence, showing Paul’s emotion.

¹⁴ Paul rarely addresses his recipients by name (but see 2 Cor 6:11; Phil 4:15).

¹⁵ Alternative contemporary language might say, “Who has hypnotised you?” They were fascinated by these legalistic teachers.

Compare Rom 4:1-11a:

- Abraham's righteousness was by believing God, by faith.
- David also spoke about righteousness apart from works – sins forgiven, covered.
- Abraham received this righteousness while he was still uncircumcised.
- Circumcision was a sign, a seal of his righteousness that he already had by faith.

Also compare Rom 4:11b-12. You are not a descendant of Abraham *by circumcision, as the Jews thought.*

- “[Abraham] is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised ...”
- “And he is also the father of those who not only are circumcised but who also walk in” the same faith as Abraham.

Compare Rom 9:6-8: “... For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel ... it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded ...”

See also Jas 2:21-23, which adds to Abraham's righteousness, that *his faith and his actions worked together.*

- “Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous *for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?* ... his faith was made complete by what he did ... and he was called God's friend.”

Cursed by the law, but redeemed through Christ (3:10-14)

The next point was also Scriptural, but this time making the **negative** point that observing the law does not lead to righteousness but instead to a curse, from which only Christ can redeem us.

- “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written ...” (v 10; Deut 27:26))
- It is clear that “no one is justified before God by the law” (v 11)
- Because “the righteous will live by faith” (Hab 2:4; also quoted in: Rom 1:17; Heb 10:38)
- The law is based on ... “The man who does these things will live by them.” (v 12; Lev 18:5 ‘obeys’)

Christ became a curse (v 13) by hanging on a tree (Deut 21:23). By this he redeemed us.

- (2 Cor 5:21) “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
- (Is 53:6b) “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”
- His life as a sacrifice; his blood as ransom.

Christ redeemed us (v 14) with a purpose:

- “... **in order**¹⁶ that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles ...”
- “... **so that**¹⁷ by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”

(Paul also answering his earlier questions)

The blessing given to Abraham comes to the redeemed (Gentiles **and** Jews):

- Only through Christ Jesus.
- Only by faith in him.

The law does not supersede the earlier promise (3:15-18)

You can hear the Jews think, “But surely the law plays a very important role!” So, Paul gave an **example from everyday life**, contrasting the promise and the law and applying it to Abraham's inheritance:

- Human covenant/testament¹⁸: once in force (duly established), you can't change it or ignore it.
- First, the covenant with Abraham came, with promises.
- The law came later, which does not set aside the covenant with Abraham.

¹⁶ Gr *hina*, expressing a purpose.

¹⁷ Ditto.

¹⁸ Gr *diatheke* can mean both covenant or (last) will or testament.

The promises were given to Abraham and his “seed” (singular, not plural; v 16): one person, who is Christ.

The Jews had always lived with the idea that they were the people of the promise, the seed of Abraham. This argument denies that the promise is for the natural descendants of Abraham, pointing directly to Jesus (and those in him).

This exegesis may look far-fetched at first:

- Seed is often a collective noun (no need to say ‘seeds’ when used for plural);
- Compare, Abraham’s ‘seed’ (*NIV: offspring*) would be as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:5; 22:17).

However, the usage as singular noun is not unique:

- In OT seed is sometimes clearly used in the singular (e.g. Gen 3:15 “her ‘seed’, he”; 2 Sam 7:12 Solomon);
- Also, God said the promise was for the ‘seed’ Isaac (singular; Gen 21:12), a type of Christ; not for the ‘seed’ Ishmael (Gen 21:13), who received different promises.
- It is God who inspired Paul to write this exegesis;
- Compare Peter’s exegesis in Acts 3:25-26, where Peter applies the promise to the gospel period;
- Heb 11:8-16 shows that Abraham expected fulfilment of the promises to him not only physically on earth, but much more so spiritually in the future.

(v 17) “The law, introduced 430 years¹⁹ later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God, and this do away with the promise.”

- If, since then, the inheritance²⁰ depended on the law, it would have ‘set aside’ the promise (v 18),
- but this is not true: God gave the inheritance “to Abraham through a promise.”

The promise preceded the law, is more powerful than the law and is higher than the law, bringing real fruit:

1. The promise came first and was duly established by God (compare a testament and inheritance).
2. So it depends on what God does, not what we do (promise, inheritance). It is God’s gift, leading to blessing in abundance.
3. The law gives conditions we have to meet (depends on what we do).
4. The law is the opposite of the promise and grace (conditions as opposed to gift)

What, then, was the purpose of the law? (3:19-25)

Paul’s opponents could think that Paul left no place whatsoever for the law and was actually opposed to it. In fact, Paul had already said:

- The law could not give the Holy Spirit (3:1-5)
- The law could not give righteousness (3:6-9)
- The law could not justify, only condemn (3:10-12)
- The law could not fulfil the promise to Abraham and his inheritance (3:15-18)

Paul’s answer would be eagerly awaited:

1. “[The law] was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.” (v 19a)
 - The law was a temporary measure, **until**²¹ Christ.

¹⁹ COMMENT regarding “430 years”:

Gen 15:13 (also Acts 7:6), enslaved four hundred years.

Gen 15:16, the fourth generation will come back here.

Ex 12:40, 430 years in Egypt.

But the promise was exactly the same to Abraham (Gen 22:18), to Isaac (Gen 26:4) and to Jacob (Gen 28:14). The three patriarchs are often grouped together, as if they are one. So, it is possible that Paul is counting from Jacob.

²⁰ Here, the meaning of ‘testament’ rings in the background. As even the last will of a human cannot be changed afterwards, how much more is this true for the ‘will’ of God.

- Compare Rom 3:20 “Through the law we become conscious of sin.”
- Rom 5:13 “Sin is not taken into account when there is no law.” (also Rom 4:15)
- Rom 5:20 “The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more ...”

Therefore, the law revealed God’s will and how we should live.

- Through the law people could realise that it was impossible to obey God’s laws completely.
- The realisation of their sinfulness, and the hopelessness of their situation, could prove their desperate need for a Saviour.²²

2. (v 19b-20) Another reason why the promise is ‘higher’: the promise was given directly from God to Abraham, while the law was given indirectly, through angels by a mediator (Moses; Deut 5:5).²³

A mediator represents two parties, “... **but God is one!**” (v 20).

Mediating may involve:

- Negotiations or conditions (from the one party, to be met by the other party).

If this was the case here, it would depend partly on us (as with the law; see Gal 3:12).

- See also 1 Tim 2:5-6a “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men ...” (he fulfilled the ‘conditions’ himself)

3. (v 21) “Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.”

- The law is not contrary to the promise, opposing the promise.
- But, it cannot be a competitor (not even an inferior one), because it is unable to bring life (a new creation) and righteousness.
- (Consider, if the law could bring life, Paul possibly might have received it, for he “was extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers”; 1:14).
- Also remember 2:21 “If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.”
- Both, promise and law, were given by God and are both important, but for different reasons.
- The law was not evil but very good, though not for salvation.

The law has a temporary task in convincing men of the necessity of a Saviour. See following verses:

- “... Scripture declares that the whole world is a **prisoner** of sin.” (v 22)
- “... so that what was promised ... given through faith ... might be given to those who believe.”
- “... we were held **prisoners** by the law ...” (v 23)
- “... locked up until faith should be revealed.”

Human position (without Christ) is a very bleak one :

- Imprisoned in cells, fastened with chains.
- Every sin we commit draws the bonds tighter.
- 1 Jn 5:19 “The whole world is under the control of the evil one.”
- Rom 3:10 “There is no one righteous, not even one.”
- Jn 8:34 “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”
- Rom 6:23a “The wages of sin is death.”
- All this results in crying out for freedom, a way out, which is only given by faith in Christ.

²¹ The word ‘until’ indicates a temporary measure, not a permanent solution or means of salvation.

²² F.B. Meyer: “The Mosaic law was not designed to be the final code of the religious life, but to prepare the soil of the human heart to receive Jesus Christ in all the fullness of his salvation.”

²³ Other verses about the law given by angels to Moses: Acts 7:38, 53; Heb 2:2 (possibly Deut 33:2; Ps 68:17-18).

4. (v 24) The law was put in charge (some translations: our schoolmaster, our tutor) to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”
- The Greek word used here is *‘paidagogos’* (from which the word ‘pedagogue’ is derived). This is not a schoolmaster or tutor, but the servant (usually a slave) who looked after his master’s son, a guardian who took him to and from school, escorted and disciplined him.
 - His severe discipline made the boy yearn for the day of freedom, when he would be old enough to do what he liked – another cry for freedom.
 - So, the law shows the necessity of a Saviour, makes people cry for deliverance.²⁴

The context of the promise:

- through faith in Jesus Christ (v 22);
- to those who believe (v 22);
- ... until faith should be revealed (v 23)
- that we might be justified by faith (v 24).

5. (v 25) “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.”
- No longer under the *paidagogos*; old enough to make our own decisions.
 - The Judaist teachers wanted a *paidagogos* forever.
 - Under the law: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:24-25).

Promise to those with faith in Christ: “Therefore there is now no condemnation ... the law of the Spirit of life sets me free from the law of sin and death.” (Rom 8:1-2)

You are all sons of God! (3:26-29)

In this new era (v 26):

- “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” – they were no longer immature children, but mature sons of God.
- “... all of you who were baptised in to Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ!” – When God looks at us, he sees Christ!

We are a new creation, have a new identity and have the righteousness of Christ.

It does not matter what your former, natural identity is:

- Jew/Greek (Gentile) – you are not less than any of the Jews or these Judaisers
- slave/free
- male/female; **you are all one in Christ ...**

In those days the differences were very distinctive (religious, social, sexual), but in Christ all are one; all have equal rights in receiving spiritual blessings. Compare Col 3:11.

And then, coming back to the point of promise vs law: (v 29) “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

- So the Jews are not automatically descendants of Abraham, it depends on faith in Christ.
- Not only sons (descendants), but also heirs.
- (Eph 2:14-15) “Christ has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.”
- (1 Pet 2:9-10) ... chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation, people belonging to God.
(what first was said about Israel is now said of the redeemed community in Christ)

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²⁴ See John Stott, “No man has ever appreciated the gospel until the law has first revealed him to himself. It is only against the inky blackness of the night sky that the stars begin to appear, and it is only against the dark background of sin and judgment that the gospel shines forth.” (*Only One Way: The Message of Galatians; 1968*)