

Study 4: Galatians Chapter 3

Introduction

Paul now gets into the “nitty-gritty” of the letter, although in his usual style he has already made quite a few comments towards the line that he is about to take.

He has sufficiently established his credentials and authority to ensure that the Galatians will take heed of what he has to say. In the central two chapters, Paul builds the core theme - that justification comes from faith in Christ, and not by keeping of the Law of Moses.

Body of the Study

How does Paul address the Galatians at the beginning of the chapter?

What was the test of the Galatians faith?

What are the implications?

How is Abraham presented as an example?

What are the consequences of keeping the Law?

What did Jesus do?

The example of a man's covenant

What was the purpose of the Law?

Can salvation come by the Law?

How does Paul conclude the first part of his argument?

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *How is the 430 years of Gal 3:17 reconciled to the 400 years of Acts 7:6?*
- *How does Paul's conclusion that we are not saved by “Law” reconcile to the fact that we live under the Law of Christ (Gal 6:2)?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 4 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 4: Chapter 3

Introduction

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Body of the Study

How does Paul address the Galatians at the beginning of the chapter?

Before answering this question, we need to remember that Paul has visited these brethren on four occasions, and has a very strong rapport with them. They have well understood the very nature of the issue – that you don’t have to become a Jew in order to be a christian. Even if they did not understand any of the other apostles, they should have well understood Paul – they had been with him, and seen the things that he had done amongst them with his own hands (Acts 14:3, 10, 19-20, 16:4-5, 18:23).

But their problem was that they were fickle. They were too easily persuaded. They would flip and flop in the wind. When Paul was there, they would believe him, and when the Judaisers came along they would “dump Paul” and side with them.

So, Paul addresses them in very strong terms “*O foolish Galatians!...*” “*...Who has bewitched you...*” (3:1) What Paul is saying to them is “I can’t believe this” he essentially says to them “You stupid idiots! – What were you thinking?”

What was the test of the Galatians faith?

Paul presents initially two pieces of evidence to support the position that the Galatians should be taking:

- 1 Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified before your own eyes.

This is not to say that they literally saw the crucifixion of Jesus (although it could be possible that some of them did), but rather that the preaching of Paul was so focused on Jesus, His sufferings, and what he accomplished through the cross that it was just as if they had actually been there.

The implication of this is that salvation can only be achieved through the cross (not literally the cross, but what the cross represents in the sacrifice of the saviour). And importantly, that the salvation through the cross was available to them! (Even though they were Gentiles). As such, they had fully embraced the salvation and they wore the name of Jesus.

2. They had the spiritual gifts.

The implication that Paul makes on them is (tongue in cheek) “*I wonder where you got them???*” The spiritual gifts were of course, to *confirm the word* (Mk 16:20). Paul (who had the power that goes with the apostles) was able to give them the spiritual gifts. Whilst Barnabas and Silas had the gifts, they could not pass them on like Paul could.

So, God has confirmed the things that Paul taught through the miraculous gifts. That should have been the end of the matter as far as the Galatians were concerned. God had shown his approval of what Paul taught through the gifts, but what were the Judaisers offering as support for what they were teaching? The only thing that they could offer was a “*we say so*” from the brethren in Jerusalem.

What are the implications?

The things that the Galatians had, did not come from the Law of Moses. They came by faith in Christ Jesus. Whilst this is true for the miraculous gifts, it is also true for their salvation. Their salvation came by their faith in the crucified saviour. It did not come by obeying the works of the Law (and entering the covenant relationship through the sign of circumcision, as the Judaisers would have them to do).

Paul says “*Are you so stupid? You have begun by walking with Christ, but you think that perfection now comes by going back to the Law of Moses?*” (my paraphrase of vs 3:3).

The next thing that Paul throws at them, is their suffering. Remember that when Paul was there on the first journey, the Jews chased him from city to city. Eventually, Paul was stoned and “left for dead” at Lystra. The Jews were active in their attack on the christians. And the christians knew what persecution meant. But, now, they are wanting to turn around and join up with the Jews? Well, if salvation came from being a Jew, then why have they put up with the persecution for all of this time (around 13 years since Paul was first there and some of them would have been converted)?

And then there are the miracles. (We have already discussed this idea, so I won’t elaborate on it again).

How is Abraham presented as an example?

Throughout the scriptures, Abraham is presented as a typical life of faith. There are many places where it is said “*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*” When we look at the times in his life when this is said to Abraham, it is not just a one-off thing. It happens on several occasions over a great span of Abraham’s life.

But the thing that both the Jews and the Galatians need to remember is that the blessings of Abraham did not come on account of his being a Jew. The Jews had the idea “We’re right with God because we are the children of Abraham” but Paul points them to the truth that the true children of Abraham are those who have faith like he did.

Importantly, Abraham was not blessed because he was a Jew and kept the Law of Moses. In fact, he was blessed a long time before the Law of Moses came along. And he was blessed *before he became a Jew*. (Paul will elaborate on this a bit later in the chapter).

But because of Abraham’s faith (3:8) God foresaw what would happen, and prophesied that “In you shall all nations be blessed” God was talking about Jesus the Messiah, who would be one of the physical descendants of Abraham. Remember that at the time that God first made the promise to Abraham he was 75 years old, and that it would take another 25 years before the promise would come to fruition. Yet Abraham continued to believe in God, and demonstrated his faith throughout this time.

The Judaisers had not recognised the application of Abraham’s faith – that he was blessed because of his *faith*, not because of his *Jewishness*. And the implication is that if we have faith like Abraham, then God will bless us too – and God’s blessings do not come from keeping the Law of Moses!

What are the consequences of keeping the Law?

It is (partly) true that salvation can come by keeping the Law of Moses. The Law was given so that we might know right and wrong (at least as far as what God says is right and wrong). [We can say that two plus two equals four, and that is right. We can say that two plus two equals five, and that is wrong. But if a person inadvertently answered “5”, would that be justification for God to condemn him? I think not. Perhaps if he tried to *deceive* someone by his answer it would be a different situation – but the issue is then *deception*. What I am illustrating here is that “right and wrong” in and of themselves do not condemn a person – it is a matter of being *right in accordance with what God has said* in the Law of Moses, or *wrong* in accordance with the Law of Moses that is going to condemn the person.]

Now the problem arises. Who can keep the Law perfectly? Every Jew who ever lived has failed in one way or another from keeping the Law perfectly (Rom 3:10-12). Except Jesus. And the implication is that every person who does not keep the Law perfectly and fully, is condemned by the full force of the Law. “*If a man keep the whole Law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all*” (Js 2:10)

Theoretically, it would be possible for a person to have fully kept the Law and not be condemned. But when we look at the multiple examples of “faithfulness” in the Old Testament, we can see that none of the people who are held up as great examples of faith are there because they kept the Law perfectly. Noah became drunk in his old age. Abraham lied about Sarah being his wife on two occasions, and had a sexual relationship with Sarah’s handmaiden. David (a man after God’s own heart” had an affair with Bathsheba and then manipulated to have her husband killed to cover it up.

Paul quotes Hab 2:4, to show that righteousness does not come by keeping the Law of Moses, but by faithfulness to God. Abraham is the first and great example of this, but when we look at faith’s hall of fame in Hebrews chapter 11, we can see great and many examples of faithful men and women who committed their lives to God. (And all of whom fell short when they were measured up against the keeping of the Law of Moses).

Paul contrasts this kind of faith with the Law. The Law was proscriptive. “*Do not touch, Do not taste, Do not handle...*” (Col2:21) It did not require a lot of thinking about. It just required *doing*. But faithfulness to God requires much more than that. It requires obedience *from the heart*. God said that the new covenant was going to be different to the old, because it would require His Law written on our hearts, not on tables of stone (Jer 31:31-34 / Heb 8:8-12).

What did Jesus do?

Jesus took on the curse that comes from the Law of Moses, by taking the curse to himself, By doing this, he freed us from the curse. Jesus was able to be the perfect sacrifice, because he fully kept the Law without sin, and was therefore not under its condemnation.

The Old Covenant foreshadowed that Jesus would come and take on the curse. Paul quotes from Dt 21:23, which says that Jesus was cursed because of the particular way that He died – by hanging on a tree. (We need to remember that Deuteronomy – and all of the Old Testament - was written in particular view of what was to happen with Christ, and that Jesus’ death on the cross was not a co-incidence, but rather the fulfilment of the prophecies of old).

The upshot is, that Jesus took on the curse of the Law, and relieved us of that condemnation!

Because of Jesus sacrifice, the Gentiles are now blessed through the promise of Abraham “*In you shall **ALL** nations of the earth be blessed*” (Gen 12:3). The implications and fulfilment is that we receive the Holy Spirit (and the Gentiles received the spiritual gifts that went with it in the first century) because of our faith in Jesus. [Note, this is NOT to say that *faith* is the only thing

necessary to receive the spiritual gifts, for they were only imparted through the laying on of the hands of the apostles. But they were *NEVER* imparted without faith on the part of the recipient, and then only when God considered it appropriate – ie the apostles were not in control of whether or not the gifts were received, nor of what gift the recipient would receive].

The example of a man's covenant

Paul uses the example of a covenant that a man might make with someone else. Once it has been signed and agreed to it cannot be changed – either by adding to it, or by taking anything away from it. And this is exactly the situation with God's promises to Abraham. Once they had been made they cannot be changed.

The Abrahamic promise was made to the seed of Abraham “...*In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed...*” (Gen 12:3) The *seed promise* was specific, and did not refer to multiple offspring, but to one specific offspring – namely Jesus.

God made the promises to Abraham. They cannot be broken. The promise was specific about the blessings. The blessings would come from Jesus, the specific offspring of Abraham. And through the promise, the Gentiles would also become heirs of God and enjoy the blessings that until Christ had been (essentially) the sole domain of the Jews.

And that cannot be changed! – Even by the Judaisers who want to bind the Law of Moses on the Gentiles!

In fact, the Law was given 430 years after the promises were made to Abraham. So, if Abraham was blessed because of his faith, then it was not because he was keeping the Law of Moses! Even more, the Law cannot take away or annul the promises that God had made to Abraham so many years before. The promises are assured. Importantly, the promises to Abraham came before he became a Jew, and therefore had nothing to do with his “Jewishness”, or keeping the Law of Moses, or being bound by its requirements.

What was the purpose of the Law?

The Law had a quite specific purpose. It was to be a training ground – a schoolmaster – a teacher.

Through the Law, we (mankind in general, and the Jews in particular) learned “right and wrong”. Paul discusses this much deeper in the Roman letter (Romans chapters 4 through 7). The Law set boundaries. It defined sin. And by so defining right and wrong, it showed that none of us could keep it perfectly. We are therefore all condemned by God (and rightly so) because we have all sinned.

We need God's help. We cannot do it on our own. We need a Saviour. We need the seed who was promised to Abraham.

When the Law was given through Moses, Moses acted as a mediator. And the Law was not given directly to Moses from God, but through the intervention of angels (Dt 33:2, Heb 2:2). But what about the gospel of Christ? It was given directly from God without the intervention of angels, with the Son of God (God in the flesh) in the role of the mediator.

Can salvation come by the Law?

If it was possible that salvation could have come by the Law, then the Law would have been given in that way. God did not want to sacrifice His only Son, but there was no other way. If there was, then God would have done it that way. (3:20).

We have already discussed the idea of keeping the Law perfectly. Whilst it was possible theoretically, it was a practical impossibility. And only God could do it.

The Law therefore *brings us to Christ*. It makes us *understand* that we cannot do this on our own. It *convicts us* of our sins, and makes us know that we need a saviour.

The Jew might argue that the daily and the yearly sacrifices took away sins, and in a sense that is true. It was like an aspirin, and took away the symptoms of sin, but did not take away the actuality of sin. The actuality of sin was only taken away by the saviour. To follow the same line, God wants to take us to the dentist to have the bad teeth removed and take away the pain forever, whilst the Jews are just asking for more aspirin! The Hebrew writer makes much of the permanent nature of the sacrifice of Christ and the temporal nature of the sacrifices under the Law of Moses. They are detailed in my Hebrews study, and I will not repeat them all here.

Paul brings the crunch. The Law was to bring us to Christ. After Christ has come, why do we want to go back to the Law? It is like a University student who graduates. It is time to leave the shelter of University and enter the workforce. He (or she) has been equipped for the task. It is time to take the challenge, but some just want to stay in the sheltered life of University (“professional students” – we had them when I was at University, and I’m sure that there are still examples of them around now). The Jews didn’t want to leave their shelter of the Law. They didn’t want to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. *“Their hearts were hardened, lest they saw with their eyes and heard with their ears”*.

How does Paul conclude the first part of his argument?

There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. We are all one in Christ. We are all children of God by faith. We are all Abraham’s children, and therefore heirs of God according to the promise.

Paul notes how we *became* God’s children: “...as many of as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ...” (3:27). How we “put on Christ” is by being baptised (immersed) into Him. (see also Rom 6:1-11)

Consequently, there is no distinction to be made between the Jew and the Gentile. This hits hard at the core issue – that the Judaisers wanted the Gentiles to become Jews. Paul’s argument is that there is no difference – you are all one in Christ, so why are you trying to make differences that don’t exist!

This is the true test of whether we are descendants of Abraham. If we belong to Christ, then it can only be because of our faith (and the consequence of putting our faith into action through obedience in being baptised). It cannot come by the keeping the works of the Law. If we are Christ’s, then we are the true sons of Abraham –with or without the physical lineage makes absolutely no difference.

One final thought.

God made three promises to Abraham – The Land promise, the National promise, and the Seed promise. The Jews thought that relationship to God came through the physical descent (the National promise), and they wanted to bind on the Gentiles the sign (circumcision) that made people Jews.

But Paul says that true relationship with God does not come from the National promise, but from the Seed promise! And that promise is available to everyone of every nation, Jew or Gentile. The Jews were looking at the wrong promise to Abraham!!!