



07. Galatians 3:6-14

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1. Paul argues from their experience: 3:1-5

The Jews among the Galatians had striven to obey God by being faithful to what they understood to be God's will as expressed in the Torah. What drew them into communion with God was not their keeping all the laws. It was their obedience. It was their loving God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength.

Thanks to Jesus they had come to realise that much of what they used to think was God's will was an expression of their imperfect understanding of God.

(God does not hate their enemies, or want lepers banished, or ...)

Their Christian experience flowed from their sharing in Jesus' Spirit, Jesus' communion with God, Jesus' faith.

Some of the Gentiles among the Galatians and learned from the Jews about God and what they understood as God's will. Others had no contact with Jews.

Like the Jews, they embraced the Good News because of the communion with God that they experienced when they welcomed God's grace as revealed in Jesus.

Paul insists that there is no reason to become Jews. They should keep their focus on the Risen Jesus present in the Christian community, and trust their Christian experience.

2. Paul argues from Sacred Scripture Galatians 3:6-14

[1] ⁶Just as Abraham ‘believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’ [Genesis 15:6] ⁷so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.

[2] ⁸And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.’ [Genesis 12:3; 18:18] ⁹For this reason, those who believed are blessed with Abraham who believed.

[3] ¹⁰For all who rely on observance of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law’ [Deuteronomy 27:26].

[4] ¹¹Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ [Habakkuk 2:4].

[5] ¹²But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary ‘Whoever does the works of the law will live by them’ [Leviticus 18:5].

[6] ¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ [Deuteronomy 21:23] – ¹⁴in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

The Judaeen missionaries in Galatia are using Scripture in an attempt to demonstrate to the Jewish Christians in the churches of Galatia that the gospel proclaimed to them by Paul is essentially defective and that they must observe the law in order to be saved. This is exerting pressure of the Gentile Christians. If they want to remain in communion with their Jewish brothers and sisters they must have themselves circumcised and observe the prescriptions of the Mosaic law. Paul, therefore, meets them now on their own ground, and offers a methodical interpretation of Scripture which supports his gospel and not their teaching.

Before examining Paul's argument, we should note that he is not attempting to read the gospel in the light of the scriptures. Absolutely the contrary. He is interpreting the scriptures in the light of the gospel. He must do so, for, as he has already stated, something new about God has been revealed in Jesus. It is consistent with the story of what God has done in the history of Israel. Moreover, it brings that history, that revelation, and the promises and hopes contained within it to their fulfilment.

But God has done more than that. In revealing his Son, God has gone beyond the scriptures, and Jesus cannot be confined within the limits of Israel's faith, sacred and inspired though it is. This principle is central to Paul's way of interpreting the sacred texts.

I am not suggesting that Paul uses the Scriptures to support ideas which he has come to quite independently. I am certainly not saying that he misuses the Scripture by bending the texts to say what they do not say. He is faithful to the traditions he learned as a Pharisee and to the methods of interpretation current in his day.

I am saying that his experience of Jesus enlightened him to ask new questions of the texts and to discover new meanings there. Since the methods employed by Paul's contemporaries in the study of the sacred texts are often quite foreign to us, some introductory words seem required if we are not to lose ourselves in the maze of argument.

Since in the final analysis it is God himself who is communicating with his people through the inspired texts, the scribes approached scripture expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered. Jeremiah writes: ‘Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?’(Jeremiah 23:29). Scholars believed that the sparks of light which issued from the written word revealed the divine enlightenment hidden within them. The more meanings they could discover, the better.

Problems arose only when a text gave contradictory meanings, or when one text contradicted another. When this happened, they searched the scripture for texts in which the same words occur, believing that verbal connections might contain a clue as to meaning. We will observe Paul doing precisely this in the following passage.

We are accustomed to searching out the literal meaning of a text by using all the tools of criticism available to us, both literary and historical, and then we try to draw out the implications for us of the meaning so discovered. Of course this is a notoriously difficult task. It is especially difficult to avoid imposing on a text our own unconscious presuppositions. The horizon within which we have been trained to think frequently has a more determining role than we would hope upon the questions we ask.

However, the method remains a valid one, and to the measure that we are self-critical, humble and honest, the scholarship of one person will help to throw light on what another person has failed to see.

Paul's method, though obviously very different, is not without its merits. Scholars in his day delighted in playing with the text as one might play with a prism, enjoying the hundred and one reflections and flashes of colour that delight the eye. His key insights did not come from the scriptures, any more than ours do. It was partly his study of the scriptures that led him zealously to persecute the Christians in God's name. His key insights came from his experience of the risen Jesus.

It was Paul's experience of the Risen Jesus that sent him back to the scriptures with new questions, and he saw them in a new light. He was able to find, hidden in these mysterious and sacred texts, meanings that had hitherto escaped him. His aim here is to so arrange the texts that his readers will be able to see what he had come to see revealed in them.

Let us now examine the substance of his argument. He wants to demonstrate from scripture that it is God's will to bring everyone into a communion of love with God. Since we are sinners, this means setting right what is wrong ('justifying'). This is not something which we can do, either by observance of the law, or by believing in Jesus.

Believing in Jesus is essential, but it is our response to something that God has done and is doing. God is putting things right by what we see when we look at Jesus. We are put right by Jesus' faith, by his trust in God, by his obedience, his fidelity and his self-giving love.

Since the Judaeen missionaries are winning over to their view many of the Christians in Galatia, Paul takes up the challenge and argues that the scriptures, when understood correctly, point to Jesus as the one who sets us right with God, and not observance of the law.

When Paul, in this letter and elsewhere, reflects upon the sacred scriptures, he is not only attempting to counter what he sees as erroneous interpretation of the text. He does so because for him they remain a vital source of revelation, inspiration and communion with God. Paul never lost his love for Judaism. What died when he came to know the risen Jesus was not Judaism. It was not the law or the sacred texts. It was his over zealous fixation that was so locked into finding security in the law that it prevented him from recognising the surprise of God in Jesus or in the community of Jesus' followers.

Paul went beyond Judaism in obedience to God, he did not abandon it. When he went out to the Gentiles, he went out because he was commissioned to do so by God and by the risen Jesus. And he went out as a Christian Jew.

When he was rejected by the synagogue, and went out to the Gentiles, which happened in Galatia (see Acts 13:46), he did not reject the synagogue. He saw that it was members of the synagogue who were rejecting the vocation which was theirs from the beginning. As Jews, in a covenant with God, they were graced and called to share their faith with the Gentile world. Jesus showed them how, but they refused to accept him or the challenge which he offered them. Paul took up the challenge, as a Jew.

Through the grace of God, Paul was committed to doing what every Jew was called to do. When they refused, he took up the challenge for them and on their behalf. There was much in the law that would benefit people other than the Jews. Paul never rejected the law. He rejected only the law as used as an instrument for containing or contradicting Jesus and the will of God as revealed by him.

When, therefore, Paul comes to quote from the scriptures, he does so with joy and with profound respect and gratitude for the word of God expressed there. But he reads it with new eyes – with eyes enlightened by the love of the one whom he describes as ‘**loving me and giving himself for me**’. He has come to see that the love of the heart of Jesus embraces every person, for it is the love of God. It is God’s will to build a human community that is not divided by walls of religious prejudice or habit, where people could come together and ‘break bread’ without embarrassment or humiliation.

Paul has come to see that it is God's will revealed in Jesus for people to come as they are, and not to think that they must be like someone else to be loved. The love of God, revealed when God revealed his own Son, embraces everyone. Jesus, as a Jew, called his brother and sister Jews to be faithful to the covenant which they had with God, a covenant of love, open to the world. It was this Spirit that Paul caught, hence his passionate reaction to the 'prudence' of Peter and Barnabas, and hence his passionate letter to the communities he loved who were being bewitched into perverting the gospel in the name of Judaism.

Paul wants to show them that the scriptures can be read in another way, and so, in the Spirit of Jesus, he turns now to the sacred texts of his people in an attempt to persuade the Jews in the churches of Galatia to embrace a true fidelity to the Torah by seeing that it is in Jesus that the law finds its fulfilment, and that they must not use the law to divide the community of love that is the fruit of the Spirit, or refuse to accept Gentiles, as Gentiles, as their brothers and sisters, though they do not follow the law.

Let us now return to Paul's text, firstly to note the methodical way in which he has selected his texts, and then to examine his argument step by step.

Galatians 3:6-7

[1] ⁶Just as Abraham ‘believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’ (Genesis 15:6) ⁷so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.

This is the first of six scripture passages linked by Paul. It is from Genesis. We will see that his fourth quotation (3:11) is from Habakkuk.

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’.

This choice of texts is not accidental or arbitrary, for these are the only two texts in the whole of the Old Testament in which the words ‘believe/faith’ and ‘righteousness/ righteous’ occur together.

[1] Paul begins with a text concerning Abraham, the acknowledged father of the Jews. It speaks of Abraham's faith in relation to God. As we saw when examining the nature of biblical faith (2:16), it includes obedience and fidelity, but it is primarily an attitude of willing acceptance of something which God has done. In Abraham's case, God has promised him a son, and Abraham has placed his trust in God's promise and acted accordingly. Abraham's faith was his response to God's love and God's recognition of his faith is proof that Abraham really was in communion with God. If we want to be true descendants of Abraham, let us share his faith.

Galatians 3:8-9

Paul's first quotation is about **Abraham**; so is his second. In this way he demonstrates that God intends there to be a link between faith, justification ('setting things right'), blessing and the Gentiles.

[2] ⁸And the scripture, foreseeing that God would **justify** the Gentiles by **faith**, declared the gospel beforehand to **Abraham**, saying, 'All the **Gentiles shall be blessed in you**' (Genesis 12:3 and 18:18) ⁹For this reason, those who **believed are blessed with Abraham who believed**.

[2] ⁸And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you' (Genesis 12:3 and 18:18) ⁹For this reason, those who believed are blessed with Abraham who believed.

Paul's second point – and again he turns to the sacred scriptures – is that, from the beginning, the grace which God offered to Abraham, and the promises which God made to him and in which Abraham placed his trust, were always intended to embrace and include the Gentiles. They, like the Jews, are called to be descendants of Abraham, and they, like the Jews, will be 'descendants of Abraham' if they share his faith.

Genesis 3:10

The second quotation (3:8) speaks of the 'blessing'. The opposite to blessing is 'curse', for to curse is to cut a person off from the community so that they cannot receive the blessing. So Paul chooses as his third text (3:10) a text from Deuteronomy that mentions 'curse'. It is also the only text in the Old Testament which combines 'curse' with 'law'.

[3] For all who rely on observance of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law' (Deuteronomy 27:26).

[3] For all who rely on observance of the law are under a **curse**; for it is written, '**Cursed** is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the **law**' (Deuteronomy 27:26).

Having established the relationship between communion with God and faith, Paul moves on to consider the law. The Judaeian missionaries have been frightening the Galatians (1:7), both Jews and Gentiles, by quoting Deuteronomy to insist that if they do not observe the law they will be cursed. Paul argues that to restrict covenant grace to Jews and to fail to open it to Gentiles is to fail to observe '**all that is written in the book of the law**'.

Galatians 3:11

[4] Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith' (Habakkuk 2:4).

This is the key point in Paul's argument

As noted earlier this choice of texts is not accidental or arbitrary, for Paul's first text and this text are the only two texts in the whole of the Old Testament in which the words 'believe/faith' and 'righteousness/ righteous' occur together.

[4] Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith' (Habakkuk 2:4).

Paul goes straight on to address both Jews and Gentiles by quoting from the prophet Habakkuk. The setting is the triumph of Babylon. It seems to the people of Judah that all is lost. The prophet encourages them to remember God's faithfulness to them and to be faithful in return to God (see Romans 1:17). Paul includes both these ideas and uses the text to state his gospel again. Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, life – and he is speaking of communion with God – comes by faith; that is to say, it is a gift from the faithful God. It is Jesus' own faith given to us. It is for us to welcome the gift and to live accordingly.

Galatians 3:12

[5] But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary
'Whoever does the works of the law will live by
them' (Leviticus 18:5).

Paul's fifth text links 'law' and 'life'. The laws are means of regulating life within the covenant. They are not the basis of the covenant itself. The law is about deeds, not faith.

The problem is that the law itself doesn't provide the power to effect its observance and so cannot give life. For that we need to be in communion with Jesus and to receive the gift of Jesus' faith.

Galatians 3:13-14

[6] ¹³The Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ (Deuteronomy 21:23) – ¹⁴in order that in the Messiah Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

The sixth and final quotation links ‘curse’ with ‘hanging on a tree’. Since the same word is used for crucifying (see Acts 13:29), this enables Paul to unveil a hidden reference to the Messiah Jesus.

Paul tells the Galatians not to be frightened by the curse expressed in the law. He wants to reassure both the Jews who, through circumcision, are already committed to the observance of the law, and the Gentiles who are being frightened into complying with it because of the fear that they must do so in order to be saved. Jesus himself fell under its curse when he was crucified, and he is the source of the life of communion with God which they are enjoying, the life of the Spirit. If the curse of the law could not deprive Jesus of communion with God, they need not fear it. The life given by the Spirit is the life that was promised to Abraham and that is offered by God to all Abraham's children – to all who, like Abraham, put their trust in the faithful love of God, and not in their own fidelity in observing the law.

In Jesus, the promise made to Abraham – the promise of living in communion with God, the promise of the fullness of the Spirit – is realised at last for the Jews.

In Jesus, the blessing of Abraham at last reaches out to the Gentiles, as promised.

In Jesus, Jew and Gentile are bound together as children of Abraham. Their communion flows from their shared faith, not from their observance of the same law.

We are now in a position to see more clearly why Paul disagreed with Peter and the others at Antioch. It is not enough to say that Gentiles do not have to observe the Jewish law. This is true, but what God has revealed in Jesus says more than that. It says that Jews too are released by God from the need to observe the law when it conflicts with the new revelation of love that God demonstrated when Christ ‘gave himself for our sins’. To withdraw from sharing the Eucharistic table with Gentiles because of fear of what others will think about not observing the dietary regulations of the law is to break faith with Jesus.

Paul will go on to suggest the purpose God had for the law in history, and the part it plays in the life of a Christian. He has, as we will see, a profound respect for the law. But God has revealed something infinitely superior in Jesus, and Paul will not stand by while people play on the insecurity of his converts and distract them from the new life which they have experienced and which is the source of all their hopes and of the new moral life which is made possible for them through the gift of the Spirit of Jesus.

Where observance of the law comes into conflict with living by the Spirit of the Risen Jesus, as it did in Antioch, and as it is doing in Galatia, it is the law that must give way.