

Gospel, Faith and Freedom (Studies in Galatians)

Promised Blessing, not Law

Galatians 3:7-22

Paul continues to wean us from false trust in our performance after trusting in Christ.

- He retains the eagerness of his opening appeal (1:6; cf. 2 Cor. 11:1-4).

His argument moves to the past, to salvation history. In particular, he shows that we are children of Abraham. The reading also has a concentration of references to **Christ** (10x, and highlighted in bold in the notes).

- God's revelation to Israel needs to be seen through the lens of Christ.
- The veil over the Old Testament has been removed by turning to Christ (2 Cor. 3:14).
- Paul uses the inspired Scripture for reproof, correction and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16), as he later says (4:21).
- We all need this narrative to understand our faith. How does it work? What are its pitfalls? What can we expect? In particular, how does it prepare us for what Christ alone has done?

Abraham was 'the man of faith', or of the gospel—effectively, faith in **Christ** who would come, and by implication, not a man of law (vv. 7-9).

- God 'preached the gospel' to Abraham—in anticipation of the gospel preached to us.
- His gospel was 'the nations will be blessed'. He knew Gentiles would be included.
- When we respond to the gospel we are sharing in the gospel preached to him—'blessed along with Abraham'.
- Effectively, it was the same message. That's what changed him. If you want to belong to Abraham, do what he did—look forward to the day of **Christ** (c.f. John 8:39, 56).
- He was justified by faith, as are we.
- Through faith, we are in Abraham's family. The Old Testament is not just a place to learn from; it is our family history, our shared experience of the God of grace.

We are not sons (by implication) of the law.

- Israel emphasized Abraham's obedience (Gen. 22; 26:5) to support their self-justifying culture.
- Jews today still have a coming of age for teenagers, their Bar Mitzvah—they are 'a son of the commandment'.
- Popular readings of Old Testament stories can be moralistic. For example, one book of Bible stories for children says God blessed Abraham because he was a good man. A sermon on David may call us to be brave like David, but David was conscious of God and the salvation he promised, not his own bravery.
- Western culture owes much to the Judeo-Christian ethic, but this is the form of Christian faith, not its power. Western culture needs the gospel, like all cultures.

Christ completes the Old Testament picture of what *law* does and what *faith* is (vv. 10-14).

- Trusting our works leads to being cursed by God—universally (Deut. 27:26).
 - The distinction between God's curse and blessing is vast (Deut. 28:2, 15, 45).
 - Paul is still emphasizing the inflexible nature of law in chapter 5, verse 3.

- But God wants faith first in his righteous people (Hab. 2:4).
 - The law is not, in itself, of faith (Lev. 18:5; Jer. 11:3; Ezek. 18:4).
 - Law should have been practiced with faith (Rom. 9:31-32) and in anticipation of God's grace and Justifier.
 - The Old Testament itself looked for this (Deut. 10:16 with 30:6; Jer. 17:5-8 with Psa. 1; Jer. 31:31-34; and often).
- **Christ** reveals what law's curse is, and becomes the cursed one, to set us free.
 - Being 'hung' by enemies was the sign of God's curse (Deut. 21:23).
 - Christ becoming 'a curse for us' has become for us, the means of blessing.
 - Law can no longer dominate us by accusing or manipulating our actions.
 - Beware of pastoral pressure that relies on our feeling guilty.
- **Christ** delivers the blessing promised to Abraham, that is, of us receiving the Spirit.
 - All of this is by faith.
- God's blessing goes straight from Abraham, through Christ, to the Gentiles.
 - Being right with God has nothing to do with circumcision, Judaism and doing good works.
 - We are totally dependent on Christ having fulfilled all of God's promise.

God's covenant is, *first*, a promise about **Christ**, to provide an inheritance (vv. 15-18).

- The word 'promise' recurs 9 times in verses 15-25.
- A human covenant (or will) is binding.
- God's sworn covenant with Abraham concerns an inheritance for his offspring (Gen. 17:8).
 - The word is a collective singular in Hebrew that Paul knew could refer to the singular Christ (v. 16) or the plural believers in Christ (v. 29).
 - God's promises in the Old Testament are broad but become focused on David, and then on a coming Messiah—from the many to the one and then, to the many.
 - The promise to Abraham is a promise about Christ.
 - It cannot be annulled after it has been formally established (vv. 15, 17).
- The law cannot annul this (v. 17), or take over from what God promised (v. 18).

Law had a purpose, but transitory, until **Christ** would come (vv. 19-20).

- 'Because of transgressions' probably means that sin needed to be identified as transgression—that is, against God (also Rom. 4:15; 5:20). The law shows that sin is not just getting some things wrong but an affront to God.
- Elsewhere, Paul also says that the depth of our sinfulness must be exposed (Rom. 7:5).
- The law is not needed for this once Christ has come—and we have come to Christ.
 - The Spirit convicts of sin because of unbelief in **Christ** (John 16:9).
 - The **Christ** given Spirit will produce fruit that breaks no law (5:22-23).

Law gets everything ready, and keeps everything ready, for believing in **Christ** (vv. 21-22).

- Law doesn't put up a fight with God's promise.
- It is powerless to compete with God's promise—it can't give life.
- It locked us all up in the 'sin bin', awaiting release.
- That is its purpose in salvation history and its purpose in life.