

Galatians 3:1-14
July 5, 2020

- 1) Galatians 3:1 marks a significant change in the style of Galatians. In chapters 1 and 2 Paul uses his personal story as an example of faith grounded in a spiritual encounter with the living presence of Christ. The experience of faith and not the keeping of the law is seen as the foundation of one's relationship to God. In Galatians 3:1-5:12 the content and the theme of Paul's letter remains the same, but now Paul turns from his autobiographical references to reflection on the religious experience of the Galatians themselves, a consideration of Old Testament texts, and an understanding of the Gentiles relationship to Abraham. Paul turns to Old Testament texts and characters to validate his point that justification comes by faith. Chapter 3 can be divided into 3 major sections: 1) 3:1-5 – the Galatians' experience of receiving Christ's spirit; 2) 3:6-14 – Gentiles are included Abraham's blessing; 3) 3:15-29 – as heirs of Abraham Gentiles are no longer under the curse of the law.

- 2) Galatians 3:1-5 – You Foolish Galatians
 - a) The chapter begins with harsh words of judgment that are repeated in verse 3: "You foolish Galatians!" Paul is astounded that members of the church have so quickly forgotten how they became Christians. He cannot believe they have been so easily duped into thinking that their initial experience of believing in Christ must be supplemented by works of the law like circumcision or following Jewish dietary restrictions. Paul wonders if someone had bewitched them, as if some magician had cast a spell or erased their memory. It was not by performing the works of the law that the Galatians received the spirit. No, the spirit came into their lives by believing, by a faith encounter with the risen Lord. That experience of the spirit was accompanied by miracles. How could they forget such an amazing transformation in their lives? By taking them back to the beginning of their Christian experience, Paul hopes that he can break the power of those who distorted the original gospel by demanding that the Gentiles must adopt Jewish customs if they are to be truly Christian.

 - b) In verse 2 for the 1st time Paul introduces the term "Spirit," a term that will reappear 5 more times in the remaining chapters. The spirit is God's living

presence in the life of the believer, and it is God's life-giving power that energizes the church fellowship.

- i) The spirit is received with the preaching of the gospel message concerning the crucified Christ. The Spirit did not come as a result of being circumcised or following any of the dictates of the law. The spirit came when they heard the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ. When that spirit came it marked a glorious transformation in their lives. It was as if they entered an entirely new world, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon. They did not make that happen by anything they did. The spirit came by the grace of God.
- ii) If faith came to them by way of the spirit of God, then why have the Galatians been fooled into thinking that faith is a matter of the flesh? That is, why did they think circumcision was necessary in order to experience true faith? The spirit of God ushered the Galatians into a whole new way of life, so why are they going backwards and insisting on living in the old age of the flesh and enslavement to the law. Are they really that foolish?
- iii) It is the spirit, and not works of the law, that is the source of the mighty works of faith. Where the spirit is present the people of God will see amazing acts of faith, unusual signs of divine presence, and an undeniable validation of Christ living among us. That manifestation of the spirit is described by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When those are present within the life of the believer and within the life of the church, we are assured that the spirit is in our midst.
- iv) When the spirit comes it encompasses the whole community of faith. The spirit is an inclusive presence drawing the individual believer into fellowship with others. The coming of Christ inaugurated a new age where the spirit of God is made available, not to a select few, but to all. The spirit comes not to separate us but to unite us in the bonds of love.

3) Galatians 3:6-14 – Gentiles and the Blessings of Abraham

- a) The 1st Christians functioned in close relationship to the Jewish faith. Jesus and each of his disciples were Jewish. The initial leaders of the Christian church were Jewish. The Old Testament was considered sacred Scripture and authoritative for Christians. We are witnessing in the book of Galatians a momentous change as Gentiles are welcomed into the Christian church. When Paul proclaimed that the gospel of Christ was meant for Jews and Gentiles alike, it raised an unmistakable question: what is the identity of the people of God? To ask that question is to ask who are the true descendants of Abraham? Who inherited the promises made to Abraham?
- b) It is difficult to follow Paul's arguments in these verses because he does not precisely quote the Old Testament passages he uses. Moreover, the texts he mentions do not precisely support the point Paul is trying to make. Nevertheless, here is how Charles Cousar summarizes Paul's thought in these verses: "Since God reckoned his righteousness to Abraham by faith, then it is faith which distinguishes the true descendants of Abraham. His family is composed of persons who are set apart by belief, not by some other feature such as natural genealogy or the doing of works of the law. In fact, the law itself is evidence of this. It bears witness to the curse it places on people and from which Christ has freed them." So, Paul argues, Abraham is father of all who have faith, Jews and Gentiles alike. Faithful Gentiles are also heirs to the promises of Abraham.
- c) In verse 6 Paul is quoting from Genesis 15:6 where God calls and blesses Abraham who "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Paul interprets that Old Testament passage as affirming Abraham's righteousness as grounded in faith and not in any works according to the law. If that is the case, then God's blessing upon Abraham belongs to those who follow Abraham's example of faith. Abraham's blessing is not restricted to his physical descendants of the Jewish race. Rather, God's gracious blessing now belongs to all persons of faith, Jew and Gentile alike.
- d) Galatians 3:8 quotes from Genesis 12:3 saying, "All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you." Paul is arguing that his mission to the Gentiles begins with the calling of Abraham. It has been part of the divine plan from the very

beginning. Paul is quoting from the promises of Genesis to make the point that God keeps the promises that were made long ago. What is being played out in our own time, says Paul, is simply God keeping the divine promises made to Abraham.

- e) In Galatians 3:6-14 Paul quotes from the Old Testament law 6 times arguing that his case against the law is supported by the law itself. He says in the next chapter in 4:21, “You who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?” Paul is arguing that the Old Testament laws do not speak of 2 different avenues to faith, one based on human work and the other based on faith. Throughout Scripture, Paul insists, salvation is something done for us by God not something done by us.
- f) The biblical scholar James A. Sanders analyzes Paul’s debate with the Jewish rabbis of his day by speaking of 2 different ways to interpret the Torah or the law. The narrative or the story of the law is referred to as Haggadah. This interpretation of the Torah emphasizes its subjective truth and its story of faith. The more legalistic interpretation of the Torah is referred to as Halakah, which would see the Torah as a codebook instructing persons in the works of the law. Paul’s approach is to emphasize the Torah as Haggadah, as a story of God’s gracious invitation to a life of faith, not as a legal guidebook describing the pious works we are to perform in order to gain God’s favor.
- g) In verse 10 Paul mentions the curse of the law. The Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard spoke of those who attempted to live an ethical life by scrupulously trying to keep all the laws. He insisted 1 of 2 things will happen. 1st, you might think you can live your life by keeping all the commands of righteousness, and if you think you have done that you can feel great deal of pride, which is itself a sin. 2nd, you will undoubtedly come to the conclusion that it is impossible to live a perfectly righteous life. Recognizing your failure, you end up in despair thinking there is nothing you can do to find righteousness. And you would be right! There is nothing you can do; it must be done for you. That is where Christ enters the picture.
- h) In verses 13 and 14 Paul speaks of how “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.” Reminiscent of the suffering servant passage of Isaiah 52:13-

53:12, Paul speaks of Christ taking on himself the curse of the law, which then frees humanity from its deserved punishment. Charles Cousar states, “Christ, the innocent, has become accursed for his people, so that his people, the accursed, might be exonerated. He shares fully in the human plight, even to the extent of a degrading death, thereby effecting the needed redemption.” The curse of the law is vanquished by the life and death of Christ.