

# ***FPFWC Christian Development***



## **Liberating Letters**

May 2022

Spring Quarter

**May 14, 2022**

**Lesson #2 – Freedom and the Law**

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Galatians 3:18-29

**ICE BREAKER** –

1. How can you help an unbelieving friend understand that being a good, law-abiding person is not enough to get right with God?
2. What steps can believers take to ensure that they identify with Christ?

***Key Verse: If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.—Galatians 3:29***

**LESSON BACKGROUND**

The Galatian Christians were a community of believers in the region of Galatia, located in modern-day Turkey. Paul's missionary journeys took him through this region and its cities. Depending on whether "Galatia" is understood in a political sense or a demographic sense, it was during either Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13–14) or his second (16:1–18:22) that he first taught the gospel message to the Galatians (see 4:12–13).

The year Paul wrote the Galatian epistle is unknown. Some research has proposed that it was written as early as AD 48 or as late as AD 57/58. The latter would imply that Paul wrote this epistle after the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. If this were the case, part of Galatians includes Paul's retelling of the council's key concerns: circumcision as part of adherence to the Law of Moses (Galatians 2:1–10; see Acts 15:5). These same concerns were of importance among the Galatian churches.

The Galatians had received the gospel message from Paul (Acts 16:6; 18:23; Galatians 1:11–12), but there were some among them who tried to add to the message. These individuals taught that circumcision as part of adherence to the Law of Moses was a requirement for salvation; Paul declared that to be "another gospel" (1:6; see 2:14). Advocates for this approach were known as Judaizers because they called for Gentile believers to adhere to the distinctions of Jewish law. The Judaizers' beliefs were understandable. From their point of view, Israel was and continued to be the distinct people of God. It was to Israel that God had revealed himself, given His law, and prescribed circumcision as a mark of His covenant (Genesis 17:7–14).

Paul urged the Galatian churches to reject the Judaizers' addition to the gospel message (Galatians 1:7–9). Paul reflected on his own "exceedingly zealous" experience in Judaism (1:14) as he highlighted his inability to follow the law to the point of justification (2:15–21). Through Christ, the promise of salvation was to be revealed to the whole world (3:6–9). Paul went on to show the unifying nature of that salvation for all who would believe in Christ.

## **LESSON COMMENTARY**

The flow of thought has to do with promise (cf. 3:14). Paul just said that the blessing promised to Abraham comes by faith. Here we see that the promises associated with the Abrahamic covenant take precedence over the Mosaic covenant (law) because they are qualitatively superior to and temporally prior to it.

Paul used an illustration from normal **human** life: a validated contract (**covenant**, v. 15) is legally binding. It can neither be ignored nor modified. Similarly, the law cannot **add conditions** to receiving the **inheritance** (v. 18; e.g., family, great name, land). The law could not provide these things for two reasons. First, the promise was graciously **granted** by **God** Himself (cf. Gn 12:1–3; 15:18–21). Second, it was made **four hundred and thirty years** before the law came (vv. 17–18; cf. Ex 12:40). For Paul, law and promise could not mix (v. 18a). If the inheritance were **based on** obedience to law, that would **nullify** God's promise.

God made a promise to Abraham and to his **seed**—that is, his family (Gn 13:15; 17:8). **Seed** in the Old and New Testaments is a collective singular. Use of the plural would imply different kinds of seeds (e.g., Mk 4:31). But there is only **one** family of God. Abraham's seed (singular) is Christ (v. 16), and all those "in Him" are part of Abraham's seed (v. 29).

### **E. The Purpose of the Law (3:19–22)**

The Mosaic law may have unintentionally appeared in such a bad light in 3:15–18 that Paul came to discuss its function in the following passage. He gave two questions about law (vv. 19–20, vv. 21–22) and then a statement about its temporary nature (vv. 23–25).

Before getting to the details, Paul's presentation can be summarized in this way. Paul's opponents inappropriately prioritized the Mosaic covenant (the law). This misled the Galatians on the gravity and purpose of the Abrahamic covenant. To correct this, Paul compared these two covenants to a legal will—no small matter because in Paul's world, one's "last will and testament" was binding. The Abrahamic covenant came first (v. 17) and should have the greater weight regarding the means of salvation. But if Paul's opponents were right, then the law virtually cancelled out the Abrahamic covenant. Paul showed that the Abrahamic covenant was not set aside with the coming of the law (3:15–18). God's purpose in giving the law was never that it should save; it was to serve as a "chapterone" (traditionally translated as "pedagogue" or "tutor"; NIV 1984, "put in charge to lead us," 3:24), a male slave who accompanied the sons in affluent families, and who protected them by restricting their behavior until they matured ("held prisoners ... locked up," 3:23, NIV 1984). The purpose of the law was never to save. It was to enable Israel to know how to avoid sin and thus God's temporal judgment as a corporate people, so that she could begin to fulfill her role in representing Him in the world. Salvation for the Jewish people was always through having a faith similar to Abraham's, not through keeping the law. That faith, following the cross,

is explicitly in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Now that this grace has come, believers are no longer under the chaperone, the law (3:23–4:7).

**3:19–20.** The law came as a mere addendum (**added**) to the promise in order to bring consciousness of sin (**transgressions**, cf. Rm 3:20; 7:7). Law's role was temporary—**until the seed**, that is Christ, arrived (cf. 3:23). Although the OT makes no explicit reference to **angels** having **ordained** the law, it is the NT view (cf. Ac 7:53; Heb 2:2). The OT speaks of the law being written by “the finger of God” (Ex 31:18; Dt 9:10). It is possible that this is a figurative way of speaking of a mediator. In Ex 8:19, the magicians marveled at the plague of gnats God caused through Moses, who functioned as “God’s finger.” In addition, in Lk 11:20 Jesus cast out demons by the “finger of God,” which in Mt 12:28 is said to be the Holy Spirit. The “finger of God” may be an expression for God acting through a mediator. If this is the case, then it is possible that “the finger of God”—the mediator(s)—involved in the giving of the law represents angels, as the NT writers profess. But Moses is explicitly called the law’s **mediator** in v. 19c (see also Ex 20:19; Dt 5:5). A mediator communicated the intentions of each **party**: God and Israel. Thus the law was a bilateral agreement. The words **God is only one** imply that the promise made to Abraham, unlike the giving of the law, was unilateral. In addition, if the law was written down by angels and mediated by Moses, then it is doubly removed from being the direct action of God toward His people, unlike the promises of the Abrahamic covenant.

**3:21–22.** Law was not **able to**—nor was it intended to—fulfill the promise, that is, to **impart** righteousness (**life**). Instead its role was painful but valuable. Law and all **Scripture** reveal that people are sinful; indeed, they may be described as caught or imprisoned by sin (**shut up**; cf. Rm 11:32). The goal is to demonstrate that there is no hope of escape from sin by means of works, and so to ensure that **the promise** comes only **by faith**.

## F. The Coming of Faith (3:23–3:29)

**3:23–25.** Paul explained further the law’s temporary function. **We** (v. 23) refers to Jews. They were **under the law** in that their lives were regulated by it (cf. 1Co 9:20). Here **faith** (v. 23 twice, v. 25) cannot be mere human trust in God, for Paul demonstrated that Abraham already had such faith (3:6–9; cf. Rm 4:3). Rather, as in 1:23, **faith** is the virtual equivalent of gospel. The coming of the gospel ended the rule of law.

The **tutor** (better “guardian” ESV, or even “chaperone”; *paidagogos* is only here and in 1Co 4:15) supervised minors. A child’s coming of age ended the guardian’s role (v. 25; 4:1–2). Thus, just as a guardian’s role was temporary, so was the law’s. The middle of v. 24 does not give a purpose statement (NASB: “to lead us” is not found in the original text) but a temporal expression and is better translated by the ESV: “our guardian until Christ came.”

**3:26–29.** In 3:15–18 Paul implied that the legalists brought up the question of who was in Abraham’s—and thus God’s—family (“seed,” v. 16; see also v. 29). Now in the age of the gospel not only Jews are God’s children (**sons**; cf. Ex 4:22; Dt 14:1; Hs 11:1). Instead, **all** (that is, even Gentiles) can become children by **faith**. Just as all can become children, so **all** can **belong to Christ** (v. 29a).

Paul used baptism as shorthand for conversion, since when being **baptized** one gave evidence of inner faith by public confession of Christ (cf. Rm 10:9–10; 1Co 12:3), and only those receiving Christian baptism were already believers. As he did elsewhere (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10), Paul’s metaphor of changing clothes (v. 11 : **clothed ... with**) illustrates that conversion entails becoming a new person. Verse 28 puts all on the same footing (**one in Christ**); all are equally welcome to come to Christ. Not all are simply equivalent, however. If **Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, male** and **female** no longer existed, Paul could not make such comments as “to the Jew first” (Rm 2:9–10), “slaves obey your masters” (Eph 6:5), and “wives, submit to your own husbands” (Eph 5:22). Likewise, if in church ministry there is no difference in role between men and women, Paul could not say that elders are men (1Tm 3:1–2) and that women are excluded from teaching leadership (1Tm 2:12).

Since becoming Abraham’s family happens **according to promise**, it does not happen by law. It is God’s act of grace received by faith.

**LESSON NUGGET** – Beware! A false gospel robs you of salvation and of membership in the family of God where all believers are one in Christ. It robs you of your spiritual riches as an heir of the promise. Are you rejoicing in the freedom you have in Christ.

**Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary**