

Study Guide

Galatians 3

Below is the text of Galatians 3 (NRSV) with my comments and questions.

This is an extremely tangled and difficult argument by Paul. Please don't be discouraged if you have trouble understanding. You are not alone. I suggest reading the text slowly in several different translations ([here is a link to N.T. Wright's translation](#); biblegateway.com contains all the major English translations) and then working through my comments and questions. If you want to go further in your study, [Tim Gombis' lecture on Galatians 3](#) is excellent and will reward your diligent study. Have a Bible open to Galatians 3 as you listen and rewind as necessary.

Galatians 1:1-5

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! 2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? 4 Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. 5 Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

In these verses, Paul contrasts two ways, the way of the Jewish missionaries who teach that being a member of the people of God requires the adoption of a Jewish identity, and the way preached by Paul, that it is through faith/faithfulness that one experiences life in the family of God. In a series of rhetorical questions he expresses shock and dismay that they would turn away from his teaching. “Didn’t you experience the Spirit? Didn’t you understand the good news of Christ and experience miracles through the Spirit? Then why would you change your ways and follow the teachings of these Jewish missionaries that want you to add a Jewish identity to your discipleship? You didn’t need this element before to experience life in the Spirit, so why would you believe them and adopt their practices?”

Notice in verse one that Paul claims the Galatians had seen Jesus Christ publicly exhibited before their very eyes as crucified. Could it be that Paul himself was a model of Jesus’ crucified way of life to the Galatians? Tim Gombis believes that Paul was disfigured and bloodied from a stoning when he came to the Galatians. His body would have looked like the crucified Lord. Also, Paul sought to embody the way of Christ in his behavior and life. In Galatians 2, he claims to be crucified with Christ, meaning that his old way of life was gone. In 1 Cor 2, Paul claims he is determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Questions: What would it look like for someone to embody the way of a crucified Savior? Have you ever known someone that portrayed this way of being? What would happen if we were able live as if “we knew nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified”?

Galatians 3: 6-9

6 Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” 7so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. 8 And 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.” 9 For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed.

The question answered in these verses is “Who is Abraham’s family?” The missionary Jewish Christians that came to the Galatians had a different answer to this question than Paul. They claimed only Jews were part of Abraham’s family. Therefore, anyone desiring to join the family of Abraham, such as the gentile Christians of Galatia, must become a Jew by adopting the Jewish identity embodied in the law (Torah). Paul says no, Abraham, the patriarch of all Jews, was declared to be a member of God’s family because of faith, not the law. Those of the same faith as Abraham are Abraham’s family, regardless of ethnicity.

Questions: How do we mark off or identify members of God’s family today? What are the shibboleths of faith in our culture?

Galatians 3:10-14

10 For all who rely on the works 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.” 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” 12 But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.” 13 Christ 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”— 14 in 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.

These verses might be the most difficult and debated verses in the New Testament. Remember, Paul is speaking in this section to other Jewish Christian teachers that are immersed in the Old Testament and the theological debates of the day, just as he is. Within these few verses alone, Paul quotes twice from the OT (Deut 26:27 and Lev. 18:5). It is understandable that we modern readers struggle to follow Paul’s argument in this section.

Since the time of Martin Luther, most Protestant interpreters have read this passage as speaking of two alternative ways of joining God’s family: a works-based approach to earning one’s salvation (legalism/the law) on the one hand and faith on the other. For these interpreters,

the law is cursed because it sets up an impossible standard of perfection that no one is able to meet. But thank God Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law and made it possible for us to be a part of God's family by grace through faith.

Yet there are problems with this view. Chief amongst them is that Judaism is not a works-based religion in which the people believed they must merit God's acceptance. As the modern study of Paul's Judaism has advanced after WWII, we have discovered that the Judaism of the first century was a religion of grace. The Jews knew they were chosen by God and accepted into his family through God's free gift of election. In response, they kept God's law in order to please God and mark themselves out as God's people. Another problem with Luther's view is the false dichotomy it sets up between "believing" and "doing." For Paul, there was no such dilemma. Just like James, he could say, "Faith without works is dead."

Instead of condemning the Jewish law in general, many scholars now believe Paul was making a specific statement in these verses against the gentile Galatians adopting the Jewish law. Paul would never say anything bad, in general, against the law. He was a Jewish rabbi. He loved the law. In this passage he is not speaking in abstract terms about a merit-based path to God versus a faith/grace based path. Instead, Paul is speaking specifically to the Galatians and the Jewish missionaries who are trying to convert them. To the Jewish followers of Christ telling the Galatians to adopt a Jewish identity, Paul says "Why do you want to come back under the law? You have chosen not to live under it but under Christ. If you go back in you will be cursed because you are living in Christ and therefore outside the law (see Deuteronomy 27). Can't you see that your views are totally incoherent?" And to the Gentiles, Paul says, "Adopting the law is not the faithful way for you. It does nothing for you. You are justified by faith."

Galatians 3:15-29

15 Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, "And to offsprings," as of many; but it says, "And to your offspring," that is, to one person, who is Christ. 17 My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise. 19 Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. 20 Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one. 21 Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. 22 But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith

has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

In this section Paul makes the point that the promise made to Abraham--that all nations would be blessed through Abraham's descendants--always came through faith as a gift, not through law (Torah). God made his promise to Abraham 430 years before the coming of the Torah and God never changed that covenant (verses 17-18).

So then, why the Law? Answer: the law *serves* the promise to Abraham. The promise was always received by faith. The law was given to keep the people of Israel distinct until the time when the promise was fulfilled. Is the law bad? Is the law contrary to the will of God? "No way," says Paul. The law is good. It is simply doing something separate and different from the promise. Only the promise is able to generate life. This was never the Mosaic law's job. It was never intended to bring about this kind of life. The law was always a temporary measure meant to keep the Jews in custody. It was a sort of tutor meant to care for the people of God by holding them together until the coming of Christ.

But now Christ has come (the seed)! The Jewish law no longer is needed to perform a confining function. Now there is one multi-ethnic people of God (verse 25-29). There is a new reality! There is neither Jew nor Gentile when it comes to defining God's new family. All who are in Christ are a part of Abraham's family. They are all heirs according to promise. They all participate in the blessing of Abraham.

Questions: What does "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,*" mean for us today? Does this passage have any implications for racial unity? Gender roles? Hierarchy within church structures?