

Following Rules Doesn't Work (Galatians 3)

As we go on reading this letter, it's good to remember that Paul is writing to believers in the first churches that he and Barnabas saw established on their first apostolic journey. These are some of his first spiritual 'children' and he is really concerned that they are going off the rails.

Paul himself had been a strict Pharisee, a real stickler for every aspect of the Jewish Law but, as he wrote at the end of **ch. 2** and as we have seen in **Romans 7**, he had come through a deep personal battle with the demands of the Law. He **knew** from his own experience that following rules didn't work, and really longed to see his Galatian brothers and sisters living in the same release and liberty.

You Started by Faith, Not Law (3:1-5)

He knew that he and Barnabas had brought them the true message of freedom, something that the Jewish Law simply could not offer (**Acts 13:38,39**), so where had this twisted religious teaching come from? He and Barnabas had concentrated on Jesus the Messiah, his crucifixion and resurrection, and the **grace** that they could experience as a result of trusting in him. Not a word about religious observance! (**Galatians 3:1 & Acts 13:26-43**). "You're just not thinking straight!" says Paul. (**3:1**)

"So", he asks, "just answer one question for me: You received the Holy Spirit, didn't you? How did that happen? Was it because you followed the Jewish Law, or because you put your trust in the message you had heard?" (Literally, '*out of the hearing of faith*'). (**3:2**)

"Are you really that stupid? Having started out with the Spirit of God, what makes you think you will reach your goal by natural human effort?" (**3:3**)

"And how about all your experiences and suffering – was that for nothing after all?" (**3:4**)

"The Holy Spirit is at work amongst you and you are seeing miracles – is that because you are following rules, or because you hear what God is saying and believe it? (Again, literally, '*out of the hearing of faith*'). (**3:5**)

Look at the Example of Abraham (3:6-9)

Abraham is known as the father of the Jewish nation, so Jews have always prided themselves as being ‘sons and daughters of Abraham’.

Back in **Genesis 15:1-6**, The LORD made promises to him (a childless man aged 80+ !) that he would be the father of great numbers and that they would possess the Promised Land. *“Then he believed in the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.”* (3:6) Paul quotes this and uses it to prove that the **real** ‘sons of Abraham’ are those who trust God, underlining the additional promises that the LORD made, that “all the families of the earth” (**Genesis 12:3**) and “all the nations of the earth” (**Genesis 22:18**) will be blessed in Abraham (3:7).

Even right back then, in Abraham’s time, the future promise had been that ‘God would justify the Gentiles by faith’ (3:8). Wow!

That clinches it, says Paul, “those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer”. (3:9) The words ‘faith’, ‘believed’ and ‘believer’ all come from the same root, meaning **trust**.¹

The Law Brings a Curse – But We Have Been Released From It! (3:10-14)

On the other hand, the Law demands perfection and *“cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them.”* (3:10 and **Deuteronomy 27:26, Psalm 119:21, Jeremiah 11:3**)

Paul contrasts a well-established principle from the Jewish Law in **Leviticus 18:5** (3:12) with a less well-known verse from **Habakkuk 2:4** (3:11). As a Pharisee, he would have been very well aware that ‘*he who practises them shall live by them*’ but may have been surprised to also discover that ‘*the righteous will live by his faith*’. He certainly quotes this verse again in **Romans 1:17**, and so does the writer in **Hebrews 10:38**. “The Law”, he writes, “*is not of* (literally, ‘out of’) *faith*” – in other words, faith is not where law comes from!

BUT – and it is a big ‘but’ – we have been released from the curse of the law because the Lord Jesus paid the price for us by **becoming a curse** for us! (3:13) This word translated ‘redeemed’ literally means ‘bought out of the market place’, like a slave who is bought and then released. Paul uses it again in **Galatians 4:5**.

And the purpose of this? So that, in Christ, the blessing given to Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles, so that ‘we’ (both Jews

¹ Paul describes Abraham’s own faith in more detail in **Romans 4**.

and Gentiles) ‘*would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*’ (3:14). I do like Paul’s inclusive ‘we’ !

God’s Promises to Abraham Are Like a Will or a Legal Document (3:15-18)

The promises that the LORD made to Abraham were made 430 years before the Law was given via Moses (**Exodus 20** onwards). Even a person’s will or another legal document can’t be changed once it has been ratified, and God’s promises are the same. (3:15) The LORD promised an inheritance to Abraham and his offspring long before the Law was given, and the Law doesn’t change those promises!

Jews all knew (and were proud of the fact) that they were descended from Isaac, the offspring according to God’s promise, and not from Ishmael who was the result of Abraham’s own attempts to have an heir.

Interestingly, though we can easily take ‘offspring’ to mean **many** people, the word is actually singular in the Greek version of the Old Testament and Paul uses that to show that the promises to Abraham actually pointed forward to the **one** offspring who was to come, the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. (I have not yet been able to find out whether the word is singular or plural in the original Hebrew.)

If you look back to the promises in **Genesis 22:15-18** and read them with that understanding, they take on fresh meaning. ¹

So What Is (or Was) the Purpose of the Law? (3:19-23)

If the Jewish Law only brings a curse, what is (or was) the point of it? Good question!

Paul says that it was ‘added because of transgressions’ (3:19). ‘Added’ to the promise made to Abraham 430 years earlier, to make people more aware of when they had crossed the line of disobedience. Sin/failure had been there all the time; having a set of rules flagged it up more obviously. And again, says Paul, the Law was only in force until the Offspring would come ‘to whom the promise had been made’.

There was nothing wrong with the Law, but it could not give life (3:21). That could only come through the Offspring. Until he came, everyone was confined, **under** sin and **away from** the faith which would be revealed later.

Freedom as Sons of God (3:23-29)

The contrast of two ‘buts’! In 3:23, Paul writes “*But before faith came*

¹ See also the earlier occasions where the LORD promised to bless Abram/Abraham, in **Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-18, 15:1-6, 18-21, 17:1-22**

...” and then in **3:25**, “*But now that faith has come . . .*” The difference could hardly be greater!

He uses the picture of the young son of a wealthy man, who would be under the direction and control of a trusted slave. This ‘tutor’ would be the boy’s constant companion, making sure that he went to school and did all his work properly, and would instruct him in all the things that the father wanted him to do, in some detail. The slave would even sit at the back of the class to keep an eye on him in school lessons!

Needless to say, these slaves were **not** popular with their young charges, but the father would eventually set a day – when the boy had been trained and had matured to young adulthood – on which he would officially recognise his son as his heir and as the young master in the household, and make him a partner in the family business. The young man would be released from subjection to the ‘tutor’ slave, would come into a fresh relationship with his father and into his inheritance as his father’s son, with full adult status in society.

The Law, says Paul, is like that slave for us: “*a tutor to lead us to Christ (literally, ‘into Christ’), so that we may be justified by faith*” (**3:24**) and we are no longer under it, but have come into full sonship ‘through faith in Christ Jesus’ (**3:25,26**).

I can almost hear Paul saying “Don’t you realise? You are all sons and heirs!” Because, he says, when you were baptised, you ‘clothed yourself with Christ’.¹ Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – it’s all irrelevant because ‘you are all one **in Christ Jesus**’ (**3:27,28**).

And, to cap it all, as those who belong to the Messiah, you are all genuinely Abraham’s offspring, ‘heirs according to promise’ ! (**3:29**)

He develops this picture a little more in the next chapter . . .

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You will find more in this short series about Paul, his background and ministry in Galatia, in ‘[Paul – A Man Prepared](#)’, ‘[Paul in Galatia](#)’, and ‘[The Message and the Messenger \(Galatians 1 & 2\)](#)’, all from www.justonecandle.uk

¹ See also **Colossians 3:1-17**, especially **9&10**. Paul asks a very similar ‘Don’t you know?’ in **Romans 6:3**