

There is an important bit of teaching which Paul presents in Galatians 3 which is very important for Christians to understand. Often we just read these passages and don't really think through what God would have us to know and believe.

Let's begin though in Joshua 8:30. If you read this section you will see that Joshua split the people up and sent half to Mount Ebal and the other half to Mount Gerizim. I know that's not the most interesting beginning and you may be tempted to tune me out, but please stay with me on this and follow the logic that God has laid out for us..

In Deuteronomy 27-28, Moses had commanded this event to take place when the people reached the Promised Land. The people on Mount Gerizim were to read the blessings that you will find in Chapter 28. The people on Mount Ebal were to read the curses. You'll notice that God's blessing included every facet of life:

*Deuteronomy 28:3-6 "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out."*

Similarly the curses were declared. There are curses to match each blessing:

*"Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. "Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. "Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks. "Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out (Deut 28:16-19).*

Notice the summary curse in verse 27:26: "Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law by doing them." So the point is that in order to be blessed, one must keep all of the commandments perfectly. If you look at Deut 28:47-48 you will see that not only the deeds must be done, but the attitude must be perfect:

*"Because you did not serve the LORD your God **with joy and gladness of heart**, for the abundance of everything, therefore you shall serve your enemies, whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in need of everything; and He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until He has destroyed you" (Emphasis mine).*

Paul picks up this theme in Galatians 3:10 where he writes, "For as many as are of the law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.'" Notice that it is necessary to continue in all things in order to avoid the curse. The problem is that many Christians are viewing life as a law-based scheme. They are attempting to please God, be acceptable to God and grow in their Christian life by keeping the law. This approach is doomed to failure as we shall see.

Paul begins his thought in Galatians 3:1. The first thing we read is that Paul appears somewhat frustrated by the fact that the Galatian Christians have been turned away from the truth. He appeals to the fact that the crucifixion of Christ had been clearly portrayed for them so that they would know what his death had accomplished. So he begins his detailed instruction with this question, "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?" The answer to the question should be

obvious – by the hearing of faith. Salvation comes by faith alone. Trusting only in the promises God has made that those who receive and trust Christ will be eternally saved.

In verse 3 he asks another question. “Having begun in the Spirit are you now made perfect by the flesh?” The answer should obviously be “no”. So the teaching here is that we begin the Christian life by faith. It cannot be earned. It must simply be believed. Similarly, maturing in the faith is achieved the same way -- by faith. It is not accomplished by the keeping of rules. Growth in the Christian life and growing in Christ-likeness is accomplished by faith and not by submitting to the law. In order to illustrate this point, Paul brings up Abraham in verse 6. He explains that Abraham believed God and it was counted as righteousness for him. God had just showed up at Abraham's door one day and promised him some things and Abraham took God at his word. God counted this faith, this believing as righteousness for Abraham. These promises were made by God unconditionally. That means nothing was required of Abraham except to believe and receive those promises as a gracious gift from God.

In verse 7 he tells us then that those who are of faith (like Abraham was) are the sons of Abraham. God had promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him and verse 9 tells us the conclusion to this section: "Those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham." That means that if you have placed your faith in the promises of God given through his Son, Jesus Christ, you are one of those blessed along with Abraham. There you have one of the key words of this study: "blessed". You see, we began this study with the concept of the blessings and the curses of God. This then sets up the basis for the argument Paul is going to use in the rest of the chapter and it is an extremely crucial argument if you want to understand your relationship to the blessings and curses of God.

According to verse 10, what is the standard for avoiding the curse? If we're under the law, the standard given there is that we must continue in all of the things written in the book of the Law. We're not allowed to deviate from it to either side. We must hit the nail on the head every time. This is exactly the point in Deuteronomy 26:

*“Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law.’ “And all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’ ” “Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God:” (Deuteronomy 27:26–28:2, NKJV)*

That leaves us in a precarious situation, doesn't it? Not fulfilling every command leaves us under a curse. The blessing is for those who "observe carefully all His commands." But carefully obeying every single command both in deed and attitude is not possible!

So, Paul teaches us in Galatians 3 that there are two ways to live life, and these ways are mutually exclusive. He explains this in verses 11 and 12. In verse 11 he tells us that one way is to live by faith, "The just shall live by faith." The other way, given in verse 12, is to live by the law. He says very clearly that the law is not of faith because those who do them shall live by them. The “them” I take to mean all of the commandments in the law. So you can live “by faith” or “by them, the commandments”. These are two mutually exclusive ways of living. Each one of us can live either by faith or by the law, but not both.

Paul now makes the statement that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of a law because Christ became cursed for us. Why? What is the purpose? He goes on in verse 14, "that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Emphasis mine). Jesus Christ fully kept the law in every way including all deeds and attitudes. And yet, he bore the judgment of the curse. This happened so that blessing could be given to us, the blessing given to Abraham that was given to him unconditionally. In other words there were no constraints of law-keeping on him. We receive the truth of this blessing by faith -- by believing what God has said concerning Christ's work on the cross for us. When we believe this we move from being under the law to living by faith -- a totally different approach to life.

In Galatians 3:15 we read that even men's contracts are binding. We know that is true in our culture. When you sign a contract, it is a binding agreement. Therefore it is even more so if God makes the contract. God's contracts are binding. God is faithful and true and his contracts cannot be broken. God made a contract with Abraham and his seed, and he made it as a one-sided promise. Nothing can void the contract which God gave to Abraham and his seed.

This is where the real crux of the argument begins to come into play. This is such an important truth I hope that you will take the time to really think about what is happening here. Galatians 3:17 tells us that the law which came 430 years after the promise to Abraham cannot annul or cancel the promise which God had made to him and his seed. You see, the law that the Israelites were given that conditioned either blessing or curses was given long after God promised a blessing to Abraham. That law cannot add conditions to the promise God gave him. God won't hold Abraham and his seed accountable to the law in order to receive his blessing. That would be adding terms to a contract already ratified by himself.

If you know a little bit about Old Testament history, you know that Abraham lived before Moses. God's rescue of the Israelite people and the subsequent giving of the law came 430 years after Abraham's time. God had made a binding contract with Abraham and nothing that would happen later could annul that agreement. Why? Because God's Word and promises are certain and binding. If man's contracts cannot be abrogated, how much less can God's? What Paul is saying is that if God were to give the blessing of the inheritance based on the law, then it wouldn't be the result of a promise any more, but God gave it as a promise without any conditions.

The question arises though as to what this has to do with us. God had made these promises to Abraham and his seed, so where do we fit in and why should it matter?

To answer this I'd like to jump down to Galatians 3:26 and 29 and put them together. Basically God is saying that we are sons of God by faith in Christ. If we are Christ's then we are heirs according to the promise. He had summarized this earlier in verse 14. "...that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." The blessing of Abraham... That blessing is ours! That means when God made the promise to Abraham *and his seed*, the seed he is referring to is us-- those who have believed in Christ.

The Christian answer then is that God blessed Abraham and his seed unconditionally. The law that came later could not cancel that blessing otherwise God would have been a liar in making such promises to Abraham. If I'm a Christian, I am an

heir of that blessing because I am part of Abraham's seed. That means that the promise that I am a recipient of supersedes and precedes the giving of the law. There's nothing in the keeping or the not-keeping of the law that can affect my status of blessing given by the promise of God. If I am required to keep the law in order to be blessed, he would be breaking his promise to Abraham. There is no curse hanging over the Christian. Let your mind and spirit think on this.

But why was the law given then? In other words, if the law does not apply to my situation, why give it? He answers that question in verses 22-24 of Galatians 3. First he says that it confines all under sin. In other words, the law lays down the standard and no one lives up to it. Therefore all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Don't just skip over this. That is an interesting reason to give the law: "to confine all under sin." Paul writes essentially the same thing to the Romans in Romans 5:20, "Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound." Abound means to increase. The law was given to increase the sin.

Second, before faith came we were kept under guard by the law and kept for the faith that should be revealed later on (Galatians 3:23). Before faith came the law had a guardianship role to keep people under control. A question you should ask yourself is what is the timeline involved? In other words the law guarded before the faith came. When did the faith come? When did that guardianship end?

Third, the law was a tutor to bring us to Christ. Again he says that when faith came, the tutor relationship ended. When did that faith come? We'll look at the timing of this more later. What I want us to see now is that the purpose of the law had nothing to do with giving salvation because it can't do that. It doesn't even have anything to do with spiritual growth. As you will recall, Paul asked that question in verse 3. His conclusion was that the law does not perfect or mature us. The law's responsibility was to confine all under sin, make them guilty and to guard and serve as tutor until the time that faith comes.

In the Old Testament God said that those who keep the law will be blessed and those who don't keep it in its entirety will be cursed. There are many Christians who are still trying to live under those terms, trying desperately to keep the law so that God's blessing will be on their lives. They do this because they read this in Deuteronomy and Joshua. They believe this applies to them. But it does not! What we've learned in this study is that as Christians, we are children of Abraham and therefore recipients of the unconditional promise made to him and to his seed. Christ took God's curse on himself so that the blessing of Abraham could be ours (Galatians 3:14). There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

What I'm trying to encourage you with is to realize and believe that God will not add conditions to the blessing He is giving you through His promise to Abraham. The law that came 430 years after the promise cannot annul the promise. If you're a Christian, the discussion of God's curse does not apply to you. Christ became the curse so that you won't be the recipient of it.

Now let's go back to a question we left hanging earlier. The law is a guardian and a tutor until faith comes. When is that? What is the timeline? Once faith comes, the guardianship and tutor relationship ends. When is that? Does that mean when we trust Christ and are saved? Let's continue reading.

In Galatians 4:1-3 we learn that the law is like the parent or guardian to an under-aged child. A child, Paul says, is not much different than a slave even though he is the heir of everything. Many children probably feel like that! He is under the rule of his parent until he comes of age. Even though he is an heir, he still has to go to bed when told, has to go with mom to the store, has to eat his vegetables and so on. In the same way, when we were children we were in bondage under the elements of the world. My question is still the same – when were we children and when did adulthood come? Paul answers that question in Galatians 4:4. He says, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

So there's the timing answer. God sent forth his son more than 2000 years ago when Christ came into the world. That's when childhood ended. That's when adulthood started. That's when the law's guardianship and tutelage ended. It doesn't have anything to do with our growth from childhood to adulthood or with our conversion to Christ.

During this time of childhood, Paul describes it as a time of bondage under the elements of the world. What are those elements? This is not a trivial question just for theologians. It is a practical one for us because if we find out that we are still trapped under those elemental issues, then we are still responding like children. We are living like we are adults still under the sway and guardianship of our parents and that is not a good place to be.

Let's begin with a question Paul asks in Galatians 4:9: "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?" Do you see what he is asking? There is something wrong with desiring to be in that kind of bondage to what he calls the weak and beggarly elements. What are these? In the very next verse he says, "you observe days, months, seasons and years." What does he mean by this?

Let's look at a couple of other passages and then draw some conclusions.

*Colossians 2:8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.*

*Colossians 2:20-22 Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?*

So we can see from these passages that the elementary principles of the world involve man-made religion, human rules and regulations, religious exercises that are not from God and similar things.

In addition, God has said that even his law was given to keep us under its guardianship until adulthood came. That adulthood came with the coming of Christ. When an person is a child, he needs to be told what to do about virtually everything. He doesn't have the maturity to know which vegetables he should eat and that he shouldn't play in the street. He doesn't know it's good to go to bed at a decent hour to get a good night's sleep. But when adulthood comes, he essentially has the maturity to make these kinds of decisions for himself.

In the religious realm, before the coming of Christ and the subsequent coming of the Holy Spirit, people needed to be told what to do and how to live. Humans innately develop religious rules and regulations to guide them and God gave his commandments to his people to serve that same function.

But after Christ and the Holy Spirit came, believers are recipients of the benefits of the New Covenant which promised a new heart, new motivations, and the presence of God's Spirit (Galatians 3:14; Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). Under these circumstances the guardianship of the law is not necessary. A Christian has within himself the resources to follow God and do the things that are pleasing to him. He is an "adult" in the sense that he has "grown up" spiritually. He has the internal resources he needs. He is treated by God as an adult son. There is obviously more growing to do just as in physical adulthood, there is a big difference between an adult 25 year old and an adult 60 year old in terms of wisdom and experience and so on.

So the bottom line for the person who is in Christ is that the days of the guardianship of the law are over. It did its job in the first part of human history but now in Christ its responsibility has been completed.

Please don't interpret any of this to say that we are free to live in any way we like. I'm talking about the role of the law and its place in our lives. The reason this is important is that many Christians put themselves under the law in order to try to please God in the sense of making Him happy with their level of obedience. What they don't realize is that perfection is the standard and we fall way short. Even though you may not lie, steal or cheat, do you really want God to condition his favor toward you based on whether you loved him with the entirety of your mind, heart, soul and strength over the last 24 hours? You didn't fall at all short of that standard? Even though you didn't rob a bank, you perfectly loved your neighbor as yourself and didn't look with covetousness or envy at anything at all that another person has or does? You don't really want to be evaluated by the law, do you?

Another motivation sometimes is to try to use the law to get our lives in order. If we struggle with certain temptations, we tend to go back under the law to solve that problem. The trouble is that the law brings a curse as we have seen. In fact in Romans 7:8 we learn that sin takes the opportunity in the law to produce all sorts of evil desire. Second Corinthians 15:56 tells us that the strength of sin is the law. Sin gains power when the law is in force. Life requires self-discipline, but putting oneself under the law doesn't work and in fact God pleads with us not to do that.

Returning now to Galatians 4:7 we find that if we are a son then we are an heir of God. Think about what that means! We are adult sons, not children. We are heirs of God with all the rights and privileges of being an adult son. Paul tells us in Romans 8:17, "*and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.*" We share in the inheritance that Jesus Christ receives. We are his siblings, so to speak.

Paul basically spends much of the rest of chapter 4 begging the people not to return to childhood. Notice his pleading in verse 9, "But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?"

In Colossians 2:8, Paul writes, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. Then in verse 20 he says, "Therefore, if you died

with Christ from the basic principles of the world, (there's that expression again) why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations – do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.” The interesting point here is that he finishes up this thought in verse 23 by saying, “These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” In other words, it doesn't work to set up these rules for yourself to try to stifle the flesh. Returning to law-keeping seems like it has a wisdom to it, but it does not work! It just stimulates more sin.

So my question was, “does God beg us not to put ourselves under the law?” Look at verses 11-16 of Galatians 4 and see what you think. God is serious about this. He uses expressions like “I urge you...” and “I'm afraid for you...” The answer we need for trying to live a godly life is not more law. It is in our recognition and accepting by faith the fact that we are new creatures in Christ, we have the Holy Spirit within us and we need to yield to His leadership in our lives.

In Galatians 4:21 Paul asks us to look at the picture provided by Abraham's two sons. If you know your Bible you will recognize these references as to Ishmael and Isaac. One was of the freewoman (Isaac) and one was of the bondwoman (Ishmael). The one born to the bond woman was of the flesh. He came into existence because of the Abraham's scheming, not according to the working of God. Isaac, the child of the free woman, was a child of promise. He came into existence because of the promise of a miracle, which promise Abraham believed.

*Romans 4:19-22 And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore “it was accounted to him for righteousness.”*

These are symbolic of two covenants (Galatians 4:24) – one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage and the other corresponds to Jerusalem. Sinai of course was the place where the law was given.

Paul concludes by saying this in verse 28, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.... Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.’ So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free. Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”

This is the warning and admonition with which we conclude this study. The seed of bondwoman, representing life under the law, and the seed of the free woman, representing the life of faith based on the indwelling Holy Spirit according to the promise of God, are mutually exclusive. The warning is not to be entangled again in the bondage that comes from trying to perform in order to reach an acceptable standard with God. So we are to live by faith, trusting God's promises and living accordingly. We are to accept the forgiveness freely given by God and not beat ourselves up for our lack of perfection. God is working on us and molding us more and more into the likeness of his Son. That's his promise. We need to accept that and trust him with the outcome.

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To help you pull this together in your own mind, I'm including a list of truths that we have discovered in this study.

In the Old Testament, God gave statements of blessing and cursing. Those who keep all of the law are blessed. Those who fail in any of it are cursed.

There are two ways of living – under the law or by faith.

Those who are under the law are under that curse that God gave.

Abraham believed God and God blessed him and his seed.

The law that came later could not annul that promised blessing otherwise God is guilty of breaking his contract.

If we too believe God and accept His word of salvation through Christ, we are Abraham's seed according to the promise and therefore recipients of the blessing that cannot be revoked.

Christ lived a perfect life and yet died on the cross and therefore was cursed because anyone hung on a tree is cursed. He bore the curse that was due to us.

The law cannot bring reform to our lives because with it comes the curse. It also stimulates sin and gives sin its power.

The law was in charge before the time of Christ, but now we are in an adult age when those who are Christ's are adopted as adult sons into his family and are no longer under the guardianship of the law to keep us in line as though we were children.

God begs us not to look to the law as the answer to our sinful and fleshly ways. He reminds us that we, just like Isaac are children of promise and should live our lives in that light.