

Redeemed from the curse of the Law:

A study of Galatians 3

By Mike Morrison

Paul was astonished that the Christians in Galatia were attracted to a “gospel” that heaped extra requirements on them. Judaizers were saying that everyone needed to keep the laws of Moses. In chapter 3 Paul explains that Christ died to *release* us from these obsolete rules.

Evidence from Scripture

Paul’s opponents were apparently saying that Scripture required people to observe the law in order to be counted as righteous. They would have cited the example of Abraham, since Jews traced the promise of salvation back to him, and traced the requirement of circumcision back to him, as well.

Paul accepts the challenge and notes that the Old Testament supports salvation by faith. **Consider Abraham**, he writes. **“He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”** (v. 6, quoting Gen. 15:16). His faith was counted as righteousness, without any mention of the law.

Paul agrees that people need to be part of Abraham’s family, but he says that the law is not part of the deal: **Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham** (v. 7). God counted Abraham as acceptable because he believed, and he will accept everyone who believes, because they are like Abraham in this significant respect.

Paul quotes Scripture again: **The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you”** (v. 8, quoting Gen. 12:3). God promised that the Gentile nations would be blessed through Abraham. They could receive the blessing even while they were Gentiles, that is, while they were uncircumcised.

The conclusion: **So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith** (v. 9). We are blessed in the same way Abraham was: by faith.

The curse of the law

Faith is one basis for being declared righteous. Is the law is another? “No,” Paul says. **All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is writ-**

ten: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law” (v. 10, quoting Deut. 27:26).

If the law is our standard, we are under the threat of a curse. The law can point out where we failed, but it cannot pronounce us righteous; that was not its purpose.

Paul concludes, **Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith”** (v. 11, quoting Hab. 2:4). Habakkuk connects righteousness with faith, not with law.

These two approaches are contradictory: **The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them”** (v. 12, quoting Lev. 18:5). The law requires external behavior. The problem, Paul implies, is that no one “does these things” well enough.

In a law-defined world, we are under a curse. But God has provided a solution to our dilemma: **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree”** (v. 13, quoting Deut. 21:23). Christ, by becoming human, became our representative. On behalf of all humanity, Christ experienced the curse pronounced by the law—death. He let the law do its worst on him, but it was on our behalf. We are rescued because our representative suffered the consequences of our failure. The law has no further claim on us.

Why did he do this? **He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit** (v. 14). Christ removed humanity from the domain of law so that salvation might be given to Gentiles (and Jews) through Christ. By faith, we receive the Spirit, the guarantee of eternal life.

The law was temporary

Paul has made two points: Justification is by faith, and the law cannot exonerate us. So the obvious question is: What was the law for?

Paul begins with an illustration from everyday life: **Just as no one can set aside or add to a human**



covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case (v. 15). Once a contract has been made, neither party can change it without permission from the other.

In verse 17, Paul compares that to the covenant God made with Abraham: **What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.** God would be going back on his word if he originally gave an unconditional promise, and then later started adding conditions. The law of Moses cannot impose requirements that negate the promise of salvation.

For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise (v. 18). Law and grace are contradictory. God gave the promise to Abraham as a gift, which means that it does not come by the law.

In verse 19, Paul deals with the obvious question: **What, then, was the purpose of the law?** And he answers: **It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.** The Law of Moses was designed to be in effect only until Christ came. It was given to demonstrate that people would continue to sin even after a written law was given. The law made it obvious that humans are incapable of attaining righteousness, and that righteousness can come only as a gift.

Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law (v. 21). If the Law of Moses could give life, then God would have used it to give life. But that was not its purpose. If *any* law could give life, then God would have done it that way. But by its very nature, law cannot give life—it can only condemn.

So what was the result of the law? **The Scripture de-**

clares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin... The law made it clear that humanity needs a Savior. What was the purpose of doing that? **So that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe** (v. 22). God provided the diagnosis and the solution—and it is given (by grace) to those who believe the gospel of the crucified Messiah.

Paul summarizes: **Before this faith came** [that is, before the gospel], **we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed** (v. 23). The law held the Jews captive, giving requirements but never rescuing anyone from their tendency to sin, and this bondage lasted only until Christ came.

Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law (v. 25). The law had power in the era before Christ, showing that humans are transgressors, prisoners of sin, unable to be justified by works. But now, the law no longer has authority over us; it cannot condemn us. Christians are not to look at the law of Moses as if it has anything to do with their salvation. •

Questions for discussion

- Why would anyone want to rely on the law? (v. 10)
- In what way did Jesus become a curse? (v. 13)
- Did the covenant with Abraham have any conditions? (v. 18)
- Should we add some laws “because of transgressions” today? (v. 19) Do laws cause more transgressions, or fewer?
- Do people today make themselves “prisoners of the law” even though they are not really under the law? (v. 23)

See www.christianodyssey.org for a commentary on all of Galatians 1–3.

The Greeks had a Word for it

“antilepsis”

You don’t need to be a Greek scholar to understand the New Testament. However, the original language in which the books were written was a uniquely concise and precise mode of expression. Although it is quite possible to convey the meaning sufficiently accurately in other languages, some things do get lost in translation.

In this column, we will “unpack” one of the Greek words of the New Testament to show the fuller meaning wrapped up in the original word. Take for instance the word that is translated as “helpers,” listed along with apostles, prophets, teachers and other positions and appointments of the church in 1 Corinthians 12:28.

The Greek word Paul used to describe this position is ἀντιληψις—*antilepsis*. It is the noun form of a verb that

means “to take hold of the other side,” and that explains quite graphically what Paul means by “helpers.” Say you see someone trying to move a heavy table. You take hold of the other end and help. You see a mess that needs cleaning up, or an elderly member or a young mother needing assistance, and you step in to help by “holding up your end” of their need. Someone who “takes hold” doesn’t have to wait to be asked or officially appointed—they just help. They know what it means, and how important it is, to “share the load.”

A church can have too many people clamoring to be in the “prestigious” positions. We are warned about that in James 3:1. But there is usually a shortage of people who are willing to be helpers “on the other side”—who see someone else in need and just step in and help. •