

The Case for Torah

A Study of the Book of Galatians

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Galatians Introduction

Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Pauline Scholar Timothy George opens his commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians by saying, "Jerome once said that when he read the letters of the apostle Paul he could hear thunder. Nowhere in the Pauline corpus is such stormy dissonance more evident than in the Epistle to the Galatians" (21). Paul's letter to the Galatians is a powerful message of the freedom we have in Christ and a stern reproof not to abandon that freedom. The question is, from what are we free? Paul admonishes the Galatian believers to cling to the truth of the gospel and warns them not to be deceived by any other so-called "gospel" that stands in contrast with God's Word. As Christians, we need to take his words seriously, lest we find ourselves "severed from Christ" and "fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

The traditional interpretation of this book is that believers in Christ are under no obligation to follow the law of the Old Testament. In fact, we are in danger of compromising the gospel message when we try to keep this law. We were once "held captive under the law" (3:23), but now in Christ, we have died to it (2:19). Paul even claims that the law is made up of "weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more" (4:9). So surely, we do not need to obey it and may find ourselves in spiritual peril if we do.

Yet some other verses give us pause to this interpretation and application. Paul claims that somehow our death to the law was actually through the law (2:19) and that the law is not contrary to the promises of God (3:21). He repeatedly uses the law and other parts of the Old Testament to support his message (3:6-14) and admonishes his readers to listen to the law (4:21).

To correctly understand what Paul is writing about, we need to understand the false teaching that was pervading the first century churches of Galatia. Some trouble makers had come into these churches, teaching that there were certain prerequisites to salvation, circumcision being the prime example. Paul calls this for what it is: salvation by works. And he won't tolerate it because it is antithetical to the true gospel message: salvation by faith in the work of Christ alone.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he addresses two contrary approaches to a relationship with God. The first is by faith in the promise of God (Jesus). The second is relying on our own works. Only one of these approaches is consistent with the truth of the gospel. Paul spends all six chapters of his letter stressing that we are saved through God's promise and not works, even good works of the law. When we understand what Paul is addressing, we will rightly understand his message.

With this framework in mind, let's begin.

Key Vocabulary

First, as we approach the book of Galatians, let's define some key terms:

Torah: This word literally means “instruction” or “teaching” in Hebrew and is often translated as “law.” It specifically refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, also known as the Pentateuch or Mosaic Law.

Oral Law: These are extra laws that were set in place by the Pharisees after the return from the Babylonian exile to prevent Israel from going into exile once again. They functioned as a fence to prevent Israel from disobeying the Torah. These laws were by nature more restrictive than the Torah. The idea was that if these were not disobeyed, then Torah would not be disobeyed. Initially given orally, they were later written down and collected in the Talmud. We will consider the Oral Law in detail in chapter one, as well as see its implications throughout the book of Galatians.

Justification: The declaration that one is legally righteous, achieved through the death of Christ, which is God's promise to Abraham fulfilled. We will discuss the nature of justification specifically in chapter one and consider its use throughout Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Galatians and Romans

Second, there is a relationship between Paul's letter to the Galatians and his letter to the Romans. As Pauline scholar F.F. Bruce states in his commentary on Galatians, “Paul may equally well have reproduced in Romans some of the distinctive positions of Galatians whether Galatians was written one year or ten years before” (46). Galatians was one of Paul's first letters, written just prior to the Jerusalem Council around the year 49 AD (Acts 15; Longenecker, 41). Romans was likely written roughly ten years after Galatians, to a church Paul had not personally met. With the passage of time, one could reasonably argue that Paul had developed in Romans a more complete argument than that presented in Galatians. In addition, since Paul did not have prior interaction with the Roman church, he would have needed to be more complete in the presentation of his argument when writing to the Romans. Therefore, we have ideas first presented in Galatians that are much more developed and detailed in Romans, yet the essence of the argument is the same. Again, F.F. Bruce comments,

These arguments are presented in a more systematic form in the Epistle to the Romans, written 8 or 9 years later. The basic understanding of the gospel which underlies all these arguments took shape in Paul's mind very probably quite soon after his conversion, although the way in which it finds expression in Galatians is due to the special situation to which Paul addresses himself here (*The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 536-537).

Therefore, as we study Galatians, it is helpful to keep Romans in mind as it will shed understanding on the various passages and arguments.

Understanding Paul

Third, we must remember the nature of Paul's writings as a whole. Pauline theology is incredibly complex, and at times, seemingly contradictory. Consider what Peter says about Paul's writings:

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability (2 Peter 3:16-17).

Peter states that Paul's letters are often hard to understand, and that the ignorant and unstable can twist them and be carried away by lawlessness. What is an ignorant and unstable person? Someone who is not familiar with and grounded in the foundation of God's Word, which at that time was the Old Testament scriptures. In order to correctly interpret Paul's writings, we need to have a firm understanding of the Old Testament. If we do not, we may wrongly interpret Paul to be preaching lawlessness. We, along with Peter's original audience, should take his admonition to heart as we approach Paul's writings.

Galatians Chapter 1

From the first verse, Paul sets himself apart from his former life in Judaism by saying, "Paul, an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father." This first opening line is intended to bring our minds back to a time before Paul was a servant of the Messiah, to the time when he was working for the High Priest (Acts 9:1-2) in Jerusalem. It is important to understand that the word "apostle" is a transliteration rather than a translation of the Greek word *ἀπόστολος* (*apostolos*), which means in classical Greek a ship ready for departure, a bill of lading, or persons who are dispatched for a specific purpose (BDAG, 122). It is this latter meaning that Paul no doubt has in mind when he writes, "Paul, one sent – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father." We see this usage of *apostolos* as *messenger* or *sent one* in John 13:16 and Acts 3:26. In Paul's former life as a Pharisee, he was sent from men, sat at the feet of men (Acts 22:3), practiced the law of men (Acts 22:3), was zealous for the traditions of men (Galatians 1:14), and sought the High Priest and leadership in Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2). Now, in contrast, he was the *apostolos* (messenger/ambassador) sent from God, not man.

Further evidence of this is suggested by Paul's unusual practice of placing Jesus before God in verse one, when usually it is in the opposite order. This may be done specifically to draw our attention back to his conversion. It was at his conversion that Paul stopped being an *apostolos* of men and began to be an *apostolos* of God.

Right from the beginning of his salutation, Paul is thematically contrasting that which comes from men versus that which comes from God. He compares his former life in Judaism and his receipt of letters from men to his receipt of revelation from Jesus on the way to Damascus. Through Jesus, from God,

Paul received a commission to be sent to the Gentiles. As we will see, this theme of men versus God will continue throughout the entire letter.

Turning to a Different Gospel

In 1:6, Paul begins to reprimand the Galatians for turning to another gospel from the one that he originally preached. At this point, Paul does not identify the original gospel, but he does say it is the gospel of Christ. What is this gospel to which Paul refers? What is his definition of the gospel?

In Galatians three, we read that the gospel was preached long ago to Abraham:

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed” (8).

The basic gospel message was that God, through the seed of Abraham, would bring blessing to all people. This “seed” that brought blessing is ultimately our Messiah. In Colossians, Paul details this blessing given to all people through the work of Christ:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister (1:21-23).

Sin had separated all people, Jew and Gentile alike, from the Creator. The blessing that came from the Seed of Abraham (that is, Christ) was reconciliation to the Creator. We were far off and have now been brought near (Ephesians 2:13). We are able to approach his throne because we have been declared holy, blameless, and above reproach (Colossians 1:22; cf. Hebrews 4:16). How was this accomplished? Through the death of Christ. This is the gospel given to Abraham. This is Paul's gospel. This is the gospel of Christ and is consistent throughout the pages of scripture.

A critical term in Pauline theology is justification. Throughout his letter to the Galatians, Paul shows that justification is not by works but by faith. We must understand what justification is, as well as what it is not, in order to understand Paul's message, the gospel of Christ.

Pauline scholar N.T. Wright has focused on this very issue in his book, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*. Wright shows that the term justification has been wrongly used by many, and that we must understand it the way that Paul himself understood and used it. Many have used justification to denote a change in our moral character when we come to trust in Christ, that we are somehow made morally righteous the moment we trust in him. This, however, is not how Paul uses the term. Wright argues that Paul's usage of justification has three senses: covenantal, legal, and eschatological (101). By covenantal, he means that the term is intricately related to God's covenant with Abraham, that through Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed. This blessing is justification for those who trust in Christ.

The legal sense of justification depicts a law-court setting. We come before our judge in a court of law:

- We are charged with breaking God's commandments (transgression).
- The penalty for sin is death.
- Christ paid the penalty for our sin through his death.
- Therefore, we are legally declared “not guilty,” or “righteous.”

First, and we will discuss this more in detail in Galatians 3:19, to be charged with breaking the law (Torah) demands that the law is in existence and has authority, and that we are expected to live by it. Those who break the law have sinned, and they face the penalty of breaking the law, which is death. God, as judge, declares those who trust in Christ to be righteous. Wright says that justification

... denotes **the status that someone has when the court has found in their favor**. Notice, it does *not* denote, within that all-important law-court context, 'the moral character they are assumed to have,' or 'the moral behavior they have demonstrated which has earned them the verdict' (90, emphasis his).

Through justification, we do not somehow receive the perfect obedience of Christ and become morally righteous. That comes through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, fully realized in the eschatological Kingdom (see below). By way of example, if you go to court and the judge finds you guilty, but due to extenuating circumstances commutes your sentence, this does not mean that you can go out and continue to break the same law. Rather as Paul says in Romans, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1b-2a).

Finally, there is an eschatological sense to justification in which we are declared righteous in the present, and yet this is not fully realized. The full realization of this status will be in the age to come, and is achieved through the work of the Holy Spirit. Then we will be righteous, just as now we are declared righteous. Therefore, when you see the term “justification,” define it as Paul did: the declaration that we are legally righteous, achieved through the death of Christ, which is God's promise to Abraham fulfilled.

In summary, the gospel that Paul preaches, the gospel of Christ, is the blessing that comes to all people through Christ, the Seed of Abraham. Through his death, we are declared legally righteous and therefore reconciled to God. This occurs through faith in Christ, not through our own works.

Paul would allow no perversion of this gospel. Most commentators identify the agitators that were “confusing” the Galatians as Judaizers. The problem is that few know or understand what a Judaizer is or what they teach. Understanding this is crucial to understanding Paul's argument. We will discover shortly what Paul's antagonists were advocating, and why that was completely unacceptable to Paul, and not only Paul, but the Torah and the rest of the Old Testament as well.

Not From Men

Paul now continues his men versus God comparison. He writes:

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:10-14).

Notice how many times Paul compares pleasing men with pleasing God. Repeatedly, Paul reiterates that the gospel is God's gospel, not man's. If Paul were concerned with pleasing men, he would never have left his former life in Judaism.

What is it about Judaism that caused Paul to see it as a religion of men? In the passage above, Paul uses the phrase "traditions of [his] fathers." Because of Paul's zeal for keeping these traditions, he was advancing in Judaism beyond all his peers. These traditions are manmade and are not from God.

What Exactly are the Traditions of the Fathers?

Judaism is not merely adherence to the Law of Moses, the Torah. Judaism maintains that God also gave Israel an Oral Law. The Oral Law is known today as the Talmud and was recorded by Rabbi Akiba, often referred to as the father of Rabbinic Judaism. The Oral Law is a lens through which the written law, the Torah, is to be interpreted. The "traditions of the fathers" were the laws enforced by the Pharisees of Jesus' day and the Rabbis currently. Some even believed that violating the traditions of the fathers was worthy of death. Consider this account from the Talmud about Rabbi Akiba, who was at the time in a Roman prison:

Our Rabbis taught: R. Akiba was once confined in a prison-house [By the Romans] and R. Joshua the grits-maker was attending on him. Every day, a certain quantity of water was brought in to him. On one occasion he was met by the prison keeper who said to him, 'Your water to-day is rather much; do you perhaps require it for undermining the prison?' He poured out a half of it and handed to him the other half. When he came to R. Akiba the latter said to him, 'Joshua, do you not know that I am an old man and my life depends on yours?' When the latter told him all that had happened [R. Akiba] said to him, 'Give me some water to wash my hands.' 'It will not suffice for drinking,' the other complained, 'will it suffice for washing your hands?' 'What can I do,' the former replied: 'when for [neglecting] the words of the Rabbis one deserves death. It is better that I myself should die than that I should transgress against the opinion of my colleagues.' It was related that he tasted nothing until the other had brought him water wherewith to wash his hands (Bab. Talmud, Eruvin 21b).

In the excerpt above, Rabbi Akiba held that upholding the rabbinic law of hand-washing before meals was more important than drinking water to sustain his life. Nowhere in the written Torah is there a command to wash one's hands before a meal. This is a man-made law, part of “the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:14; cf Matthew 15:2). Rabbi Akiba believes that to transgress “the words of the Rabbis” is deserving of death.

These “traditions” or added rabbinic laws brought Jesus into conflict with the Jewish religious leadership. In this passage, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees over their adherence to their manmade traditions and their negligence of God’s laws:

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the **tradition of the elders**? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” He answered them, “And **why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition**? For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ So **for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God**. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; **in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men**” (Matthew 15:1-9, emphasis ours).

Jesus allowed his disciples to eat without following the rabbinic practice of ritually washing their hands. Search throughout the Torah and you will not find a law of God requiring people to ritually wash their hands before eating. It is these added laws that Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for in Matthew 23:4-5a:

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear (cf. Acts 15:10), and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others.

Contrasted with this is Jesus' proclamation about the Torah (whose origin is of God, not man):

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-19).

Jesus constantly upholds the Torah (God's law) and undermine the traditions of the elders (man's law). Rabbinic Judaism had departed from the simplicity of the Torah of God and made it burdensome, adding to it many regulations and laws. The Pharisees of Jesus' time delighted in being seen by others, and they gloried in their own code to win the approval of men.

Paul had excelled at these traditions in his former life in Judaism. But now, like his Messiah, he had

rejected this empty outward show of piety and returned to the things of God.

Contrasting Judaism with the Gospel of Christ

Paul now contrasts his former life, which glorified the traditions of the fathers, the man-made religion of the Pharisees, with that of the gospel that comes from God. Here's how Paul writes it:

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus (Galatians 1:15-17).

Paul continues to contrast a teaching from men with a teaching from God. He says here that he did not go to the apostles in Jerusalem, but rather went into Arabia. In the first chapter of Galatians, Paul's primary purpose is to distinguish himself and his teachings from his former life and teachings of Rabbinic Judaism. Over and over he repeats that his teachings are not from men, but that they come directly from God through Jesus. This new revelation caused him to lose standing in the eyes of his former affiliation, the Rabbinic Jews because Paul now has rejected the traditions of the fathers, which Jesus points out are in conflict with the law of God. Both Paul and Jesus teach that Rabbinic Judaism as a system had departed from God and become a religion of men. Paul, renouncing his previous lifestyle, returns to the source of the gospel, God himself. As we progress through the rest of the book, we will see this same pattern of the religion, practices, and traditions of men that have led to covenant breaking, exile, and death. This is contrasted with returning to God and his message of redemption and faithfulness found in the Torah.

Galatians Chapter 2

A Biblical Understanding of Circumcision

The Torah supports that circumcision was not necessary for conversion. In the story of Abraham, God made a covenant with Abraham before Abraham was circumcised. Abraham entered into a relationship with God first, and this was followed by circumcision. In Romans four, Paul uses the story of Abraham to demonstrate God's relationship with mankind. Converts develop a relationship with God (a circumcised heart) before receiving the sign of the covenant (physical circumcision).

Compare this to a marriage. A man and a woman make vows to each other, pledging to be faithful and true to one another. They do this before they take upon themselves the sign of the covenant, the ring. Circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Romans 4:11), the outward seal or sign of an inward response and commitment to God. This inward change is a circumcision of the heart and is received prior to the external sign of physical circumcision. The external sign is a picture of the internal reality. God does not show favoritism. He developed a relationship with Abraham prior to

circumcision, and he will likewise develop a relationship with others prior to circumcision (Acts 15:19).

Search the Torah, and you will find no passage requiring a foreigner to be circumcised to enter into a covenantal relationship with God. Even Israel was able to enter into covenant without being circumcised. In Deuteronomy 29, the Israelites enter into covenant with God just before crossing the Jordan into Canaan, though an entire generation had not been circumcised. It is not until Joshua five, after the Israelites have crossed the Jordan, that the sons of Israel are circumcised. Like Abraham, the Israelites enter into a relationship with God first, and then are circumcised.

This is not to say that circumcision is unimportant. It is an outward response and an act of obedience for those who have already entered into covenant with God. For example, those who eat the Passover sacrifice must be circumcised (Exodus 12:48). This, like all of God's commands, is not an "entrance requirement" into a relationship with God; rather, God's people respond to the free gift of salvation by obeying and following God's instructions.

Paul Goes to Jerusalem (2:1-10)

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. (2:1-3)

At the beginning of chapter two, Paul reminds the Galatians that he, Barnabas, and Titus had gone up to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles about the gospel message Paul had been bringing to the Gentiles. The main issue is revealed in verse three: some are teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved. Paul stresses that even Titus, a Greek believer in Jesus, was not forced to be circumcised. Therefore, others should not be either.

For many Jews, circumcision was a prerequisite to learning the commandments (and to salvation in Acts 15:1), and so they were urgently compelling those who were returning to God or coming to God to be circumcised immediately. In his book, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, E.P. Sanders argues that the primary issue in Paul's letter to the Galatians is not that some were trying to earn their salvation by works of the law, but rather that they were requiring certain works of the law as an entrance requirement into God's people (see chapter one, entitled "The Law is not an entrance requirement"). The primary manifestation of this was the requirement of circumcision prior to salvation.

Yet the idea that a man had to be circumcised before having a relationship with God was a commandment of men, not of God. It is not found in the Torah. Even Abraham was justified through faith first, and then received the sign of the covenant (Genesis 15, 17; cf Romans 4:9-11). Paul claims that if we submit to the teachings of men, we will find ourselves in slavery. He will develop this idea,

including what exactly we are enslaved to, throughout the remainder of his letter to the Galatians.

Note that Paul is not taking a position on circumcision itself. Despite the common misconception of many Christians, Paul was not opposed to circumcision. In fact, he even had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:1-4), and he stated that "the sign of circumcision" is "a seal of the righteousness that [Abraham] had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (Romans 4:11a). But Paul's adversaries in Galatia wanted circumcision not to be simply a sign that showed faith, but rather part of the method through which righteousness was attained. Paul stands against those compelling circumcision as a prerequisite to being saved.

If we take verse three out of context, we might be tempted to wrongly tie circumcision to the Law of Moses, equate the law with slavery, and understand this to mean we are free from the Law of Moses. In order to justify such a position, we would have to find a commandment in the Law of Moses that requires circumcision for Gentiles as a prerequisite to walking with God. No such law exists. Not even the nation of Israel was required to be circumcised to be in covenant with God (Deuteronomy 29:14; cf. Joshua 5). Without finding this requirement, the argument collapses.

False Brothers and the Truth of the Gospel

Who was bringing this message of circumcision? Paul continues,

Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. (Galatians 2:4-5)

False brothers were preaching a false gospel (cf 1:7-9). This is a critical issue for Paul because it threatens our freedom in Christ and brings us into slavery. It is contrary to the truth of the gospel, and Paul is zealous to preserve this truth. He will not submit to a teaching of man, but only to God's truth.

What is the truth of the gospel that Paul is so passionate about preserving? The gospel maintains that we are saved through the work of Christ alone. There is no righteous deed that we must do first to be saved. We do not need to get our lives in order and start living righteously and then God will accept us. We simply need to respond to God's offer of salvation by declaring that we trust Him and by submitting our lives to him.

The truth of the gospel was threatened by the false brothers who taught circumcision must happen before one could be saved. Paul will not put up with this false gospel.

Paul then refers again to the "influential" brothers (James, Peter, and John) as he did in verse 2:

And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On

the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:6–10)

Paul's somewhat sarcastic demeanor in this chapter is not intended to show disrespect for the apostles, but rather to show that what he had received did not come from men, even the “influential” apostles, but came directly from God. Verse six makes it clear that the apostles did not add anything to his message. In other words, Paul was not corrected, nor was his gospel message changed. The apostles were in agreement with Paul’s message and ministry to the Gentiles.

Freedom from the Torah?

Paul is concerned that believers may lose their freedom in Christ. What is this freedom? The context is contrasting our freedom with those who “slipped in ... that they might bring us into slavery” (2:4). Paul is continuing the pattern he established in the first chapter. Freedom is found in the message that comes directly from God. Slavery comes from accepting and following teachings that are not in agreement with God’s truth. These teachings have their origin in men and they enslave us. If we want freedom, we cling to the truth of the gospel, with God as its source. The freedom we have in Christ is the freedom to stick to the pure gospel message and not introduce any extra works as necessary for salvation.

The Incident in Antioch (2:11-14)

Paul now focuses on hypocrisy among believers and turns his attention toward Peter.

But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. (Galatians 2:11-13).

Paul accuses Peter of acting hypocritically because he withdrew from the Gentiles and preferred to eat and keep company with his fellow Jews. Peter denied fellowship to the Gentiles unless they became like Jews (2:14). He did this under pressure, fearing the “circumcision party” (2:12), that is, the false brothers from 2:3-4.

A significant point is that Peter, in submitting to the teachings of the circumcision party, is not following a command from the Torah. The Torah does not command that Jews refrain from eating or fellowshiping with the uncircumcised. Rather, this is a teaching found in the Oral Law. To understand

this more fully, consider the account of Peter and Cornelius found in the book of Acts. Peter tells Cornelius,

And he said to them, “You yourselves know how **unlawful** it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (Acts 10:28, emphasis ours).

This appeal to it being “unlawful” to associate with Gentiles is not found within the Torah. Rather, it appears to be based upon the Maccabean injunction found in Jubilees 22:16:

And you also, my son Jacob, remember my words, and keep the commandments of Abraham, your father. Separate yourself from the gentiles, and do not eat with them, and do not perform deeds like theirs. And do not become associates of theirs. Because their deeds are defiled, and all of their ways are contaminated, and despicable, and abominable. ¹

Peter succumbs to peer pressure and reverts back to the teachings of the Oral Law, mainly that Jews should not associate with uncircumcised Gentiles. Moreover, the other believing Jews follow Peter’s example (2:13).

A common understanding of this passage is that Peter, in his freedom, had been eating unclean meats such as pork with the Gentile believers, but now he has withdrawn from this practice and put himself back under the food laws of the Torah. In his commentary on Galatians, New Testament scholar Ronald Y.K. Fung explains:

Under Peter’s influence the rest of the Jewish Christians had, like him, withdrawn from table fellowship with the Gentile Christians probably because the latter were suspected of not having selected and prepared the food set before the mixed company of Jewish and Gentile Christians in strict observance of the Jewish dietary laws. It follows that for Gentiles to “live like Jews” they would have to observe the Jewish food-laws ... (110-111).

Fung argues that Peter’s withdrawal from table fellowship with Gentile believers was at least in part due to the Jewish dietary laws. In this view, Peter had been eating unclean meats with Gentile believers, but out of fear of the circumcision party, withdrew from these believers and returned to following the Old Testament food laws. Likewise John H. Walton states,

Peter was “in the wrong” because, although he had been willing to shed the laws of Judaism (food and table restrictions) in Antioch in order to enjoy a newfound fellowship

¹Phillip Esler, who has written an exhaustive study on understanding first-century Christian documents from a sociological and anthropological perspective, argues that the Jubilees 22:16 prohibition was absolute and universal (62ff). Pauline scholar E.P. Sanders disputes this using the Letter to Aristeas, showing that such sharing of meals took place (170-188, 1990). Sanders maintains the issue was more food centered than that of social interaction, stating “there was no barrier to social intercourse with Gentiles as long as one did not eat their meat and drink their wine” (178, 1990). Whether the prohibition was absolute and universal or whether it was sectarian to the more stringent followers of Shammai is unknown. However, from the testimony of Peter in Acts 10:28, it would suggest that Peter's view prior to his vision was more aligned to the absolute universal position. Regardless of how one views the prohibition, the significance is that this prohibition is not found in the Torah. It is a prohibition of the man-made oral law.

with Gentile Christians, he had later abandoned this stance to pacify the Judaizers (paragraph 16720).

This understanding assumes that Peter, in his newfound freedom in Christ, had begun to eat unclean meats, yet this assumption is not explicit in the text. Paul does not say that Peter had been eating unclean meats and then, fearing the circumcision party, put himself back under the biblical dietary laws. The question at hand is not WHAT believers can eat but rather with WHOM they can eat, namely uncircumcised believers. The primary problem is that some Jews were requiring Gentile believers to be circumcised before they could be saved. Paul says nothing about what they are eating because the focus is on circumcision. Peter withdrew from eating with uncircumcised believers.

Paul recognizes Peter's hypocrisy and publicly rebukes him:

But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Galatians 2:14)

The problem with Peter's behavior is that it is inconsistent with the gospel message, or, as Paul puts it, "not in step with the truth of the gospel" (2:14; cf 2:5). The purity of the gospel message is what is at stake. Salvation is by grace alone, not by works. Paul will not allow this message to be compromised.

Paul claims that Peter, by separating himself from Gentile converts, is essentially forcing these Gentiles "to live like Jews" (14). He denies them table fellowship unless they live like Jews.

This raises two critical questions:

1. How was it that Peter had lived like a Gentile?
2. What does it mean that Peter was forcing the Gentiles to live like Jews?

Let's address the first question, How had Peter lived like a Gentile? Peter had accepted the basic gospel message: he was a fallen man, in need of a Savior, and his justification was solely through faith in Christ, not through any work of his own. The very heart of the gospel message is that through the work of the Messiah, both Jews and Gentiles can receive salvation, and moreover, are united into one body, the body of Christ.

When Peter accepted this basic gospel message, he had to set aside previous misconceptions and traditional Jewish understandings of Gentiles. Gentiles did not need to become Jewish to be saved. That is, justification was not conditional upon adherence to the law, and specifically, to circumcision.

Moreover, Jews were not less in need of a Savior than Gentiles. All of us are sinners, as Paul will explore more below in verses 15-21.

Peter knew this. Acts 10 records for us Peter's realization that Gentiles are not to be considered unclean: "And [Peter] said to them, 'You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean'" (Acts 10:28). Again, Peter says, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

The gospel teaches that no person or group of people is to be called unclean, and Jews and Gentiles are united as brothers into the body of the Messiah. The first century Jewish believers therefore could consider themselves united with their Gentile brothers and sisters and live among them, sharing all things. So Peter began to live like a Gentile, that is, to have fellowship with Gentile believers, recognizing that all people, Jew and Gentile alike, are in need of a Savior and are saved only through Christ's work on their behalf. Table fellowship is a way of living out the truth of this gospel message. It puts legs and feet on the doctrine of justification through faith alone.

Sadly, when the men from James arrived in Antioch (2:12), Peter changed his practice. He withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentile believers. His belief that people from all nations could come to God no longer matched his actions. Biblical scholar Tim Hegg comments,

Peter's hypocrisy consisted of his having engaged in table fellowship with the Gentiles when unobserved by the Jerusalem folk, but separating from the Gentiles when the group from James arrived, and even compelling them to submit to proselytism in order to be accepted by the party of the circumcision (84-85).

When the men from Jerusalem arrived, Peter showed an inconsistency between his beliefs and his actions. Theologically, Peter embraced the gospel and thereby lived like a Gentile, but his theology failed to meet his practice. He claimed to believe one thing but acted contrary, the very definition of hypocrisy. Paul is adamant that the gospel must be lived out through how we treat each other.

This leads to our next question, What does it mean "to live like Jews"? Does it mean that Peter was wrongly requiring Gentiles to obey God's written instructions found in the Torah? Many have concluded this is what Peter was doing and that Paul takes a hard stand against it. However, the context suggests this is not the case. Let's look at the situation:

1. Paul describes a scene in which Peter reverts to following a teaching of the Oral Law by refusing to eat with Gentiles. This is a teaching of man, not the Torah, and it is inconsistent with the basic gospel message.
2. Peter does this under the pressure of the circumcision party, which taught circumcision was necessary for salvation. According to them, circumcision had to occur prior to acceptance by God. Again, this is a teaching of man, not the Torah, and is inconsistent with the basic gospel message.
3. The focus here is on compelling, or forcing, Gentiles to live like Jews (2:14). This is thematically connected to those who were trying to compel Titus to be circumcised, described

earlier in the chapter. The same Greek word root ἀναγκάζω (*anagkazo*) is used in 2:3 and 2:14, which means to force or compel.

Before we draw any conclusions, we should also consider how the word ἰουδαΐζειν (*ioudaizein*), translated “live like Jews” or “judaize” is used historically. In his commentary on Galatians, scholar Ben Witherington explains how Josephus used this unique word:

The word [*ioudaizein*] is a significant term which occurs nowhere else in the NT, meaning **to adopt Jewish customs and practices** ... In other words, the term focuses on the orthopraxy of early Judaism. This is clear enough from the use of the term in Josephus War 2.454 (159, emphasis ours).

According to Witherington, *ioudaizein* means adopting Jewish practices. Orthopraxy means putting doctrine into action, or how we live out what we believe. Sadly, Josephus details how forced circumcision was a practice at this time. Graham Harvey, in his *The True Israel: Uses of the names Jew, Hebrew, and Israel in Ancient Jewish and Early Christian Literature* discusses forced circumcision in Josephus' writings:

Ant. 11.284 is Josephus' version of Es 8:17, which he renders, “from fear of the [Jews] they had themselves circumcised and therefore managed to avoid danger.” The MT reads, “many from the peoples of the country מתייהדים [*mityahadim*; to become a Jew], for fear of the יהודים [*yehudim*; Jews] had fallen on them.” The LXX expands on this, “many of the Gentiles were circumcised and ἰουδαΐζειν [*Judaized*] for fear of the [Jews].” Commentators on the Hebrew text of Esther suggest that the occurrence of the word *mityahadim* is a reference to proselytism...The addition by the LXX of a reference to “circumcision” means that more is involved than “their support of Jewish interests.” In his narration here, Josephus avoids using the verb ἰουδαΐζειν [*Judaize*], implying that the action of the gentiles was not one of conversion but merely an attempt to save their lives by emulating those they feared. He does not say that they adopted any of the other defining activities of the [Jews]. In *War* 2.454 a Roman officer, Metilius, is spared in a massacre by the “rebels” in Jerusalem because he said he would be circumcised...This is not a willing conversion but of a Roman commander trying to save his own life...*Life* 113 is concerned with an attempt by [Jews] to compel two nobles from Tachonities to be circumcised as a condition of residence with them, not as a step in conversion. Josephus claims that he prevented this and protected the “refugees” by [the] argument “every one should worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience and not under constraint” (*Life* 113) and not be compelled to be circumcised forcibly to save their lives. This is probably “the betrayal of his country's Law which Jesus, the son of Sapphias, condemns Josephus for” (135).

From these sources, it is evident that Jewish historical accounts, and especially the Septuagint (LXX), relate “judaize” and forced circumcision. Nothing in the Torah compels Gentiles to be circumcised in order to become part of Israel. Rogue Jewish sectarians, however, are clearly seen to use forced circumcision as a means to show their control over Gentiles.

Circumcision was not initiated by God as a means to control and subjugate, but as an outward sign of an inward covenant (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4). However, from the earliest times, we see circumcision being used as a tool of manipulation by Abraham's descendants (Genesis 34:13ff). This use of circumcision as a means to control and subjugate brings trouble on Israel, making Israel “stink to the inhabitants of the land” (Genesis 34:30). Thus, Jewish historical accounts, along with the Genesis 34 narrative, offer insight into how Paul uses *ioudaizein*, as a coercive, rather than voluntary action.

What, then, can we conclude? Paul accuses Peter of submitting to the teachings of men (the Oral Law) as opposed to the teachings of God. Peter was refusing table fellowship with Gentile converts, unless they too would submit to the teachings of men, the teachings of the circumcision party. The circumcision party forced these converts to “live like Jews,” which Jewish historical accounts and Paul link with forced circumcision. Recall what the *circumcision* party was requiring as a prerequisite to salvation: forced circumcision (cf. Acts 15:1)! Most likely, Peter was denying fellowship with these fellow believers unless they became circumcised. He was forcing them to judaize.

Therefore, when Paul recounts the Antioch incident, he is not arguing against the written Torah. Furthermore, he is not discussing what is being eaten at these fellowship gatherings. The issue is not about clean and unclean foods, such as whether it was okay to eat pork or other animal flesh prohibited by the Torah. The words “unclean,” “clean,” or “food” are not even present in the text. The issue is about with whom one may fellowship (namely the uncircumcised Gentile believer). Paul is not saying that Gentiles can disobey the Torah. Rather, Paul strongly disputes obeying a teaching of the traditions/religions of men, which says Jews must separate themselves from and not eat with Gentiles. He disputes this man-made doctrine that Gentiles must first be circumcised before they can be accepted by God. He opposes forcing a Gentile who has accepted the gospel to judaize, that is to adopt the Jewish sectarian laws, traditions, and customs of the Oral Law, which were added by men to the Torah.

Not by Works of the Law (2:15-21)

In Paul's description of the Antioch incident (above), Paul rebukes Peter and the false brothers for their treatment of the Gentiles, in which they demand that Gentiles follow the customs of the Jews. The clearest example of this in the letter thus far is requiring circumcision as a prerequisite to salvation. Paul now spends time explaining the root issue of this problem, mainly that justification is not by our actions, but through our faith in the redemptive work of the Messiah:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified (15-16).

In verse 15, Paul uses the first century mindset that Jews are not like Gentile sinners, in order to point out that such a mindset is inconsistent with the gospel: that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith. (This is similar to how Peter's actions were inconsistent with the gospel.)

Here we are introduced to the much debated phrase “works of the law.” In one sense, we could consider “works of the law” to be acts that are obedient to the Torah, God's written law. Paul would be right in saying that obedience to God's Torah does not justify you. That was never its intention, as seen in the pattern of Abraham (who was first justified by faith and then circumcised), as well as in the pattern of the Exodus (where God first redeemed his people from slavery and then gave them his instructions).

However, when we look at the context of first-century Judaism, we see that there is more to the phrase “works of the law” than simply obeying God's written Torah. Many do not realize that there is an entire designation in Jewish Oral Law called “works of the law” (in Hebrew, מעשה שהיה or *ma'aseh sh'hayah*). Once again, the Oral Law takes center stage in the issues Paul is combating. In the Oral Law, “works of the law” are the actions of earlier rabbis used as precedents for later Jews to follow. Consider this example:

A *ma'aseh* in which Rabban Gamaliel and the elders were traveling in a ship, when a Gentile made a ramp on which to descend, and Rabban Gamaliel, and the elders descended on it (Bab. Talmud, Shabbat 122a).

This is an example of *ma'aseh rav*, or precedent as teacher. If it was not a sin for Gamaliel to descend on a ramp made by Gentiles on the Sabbath, then it would not be a sin for us. Thus, the actions of the rabbinic sages, regardless of what they might be, are sufficient for us to follow with impunity.

Therefore, when Paul says we are not justified by works of the law, he is, at least in part, attacking the view that we must be obedient to the rules and customs of men, the “works of the law” (such as required circumcision for the Gentile convert), in order to be justified. This is wholly consistent with everything Paul has laid out in chapter one and the first part of chapter two in his letter to the Galatians. Above is an example of “works of the law” found in Rabbinic Oral Law. But Pharisaic (Rabbinic) Judaism was not the only sect of Judaism to have a set of precedents and laws, which if one obeyed, one would be deemed “righteous.” Perhaps most significant are the writings of the Qumran sect, the Essenes, because they are so closely linked in wording to Paul's own writings.

In 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the caves of Qumran, a desert community west of the Dead Sea where many of the Essenes (a sect of Judaism) lived. This collection included not only Old Testament scriptures, but also commentary on how one was to obey God's Torah. In one of the caves, a manuscript named *Miqsat Ma'ase haTorah* (4QMMT—an acronym of the Hebrew words *Miqsat Ma'ase haTorah*) was found. Martin Abegg, a Dead Sea Scrolls scholar, explains that *Ma'ase haTorah* is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek phrase “*ergon nomou*” that Paul uses in Galatians and Romans, which is translated “works of the law.” Furthermore, Abegg points out that this phrase is used not just by both Paul and 4QMMT, but more significantly, it is used only in Paul and 4QMMT (“Paul, ‘Works of the Law,’ and MMT,” *Biblical Archaeological Review*, November/December 1994). As Abegg says, “In all of antiquity, only [4QMMT] and Paul's Letters to the Galatians and Romans discuss the connections between works and righteousness” (*Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, 358).

Just what were the “works of the law” in the Essene writings found in Qumran? Here is Abegg's description:

Following a thesis statement that identifies the central problem—the impure are being allowed to mix with the pure (the profane with the holy)—the author lists some two dozen examples to prove his point (B:3-C:4). The addressee (and secondarily, the reader) is then encouraged to follow the author: separate from those who practice such things (ibid).

The writer of 4QMMT is stressing the importance of not intermixing with the impure (i.e. the Gentiles) and lists a number of rules to prevent this mixing. Right away, this should resonate with the issues Paul is addressing in his letter to the Galatians. Remember the Antioch Incident described above. The false teachers in Galatia were teaching that Jewish believers were not to fellowship and eat with uncircumcised Gentile converts.

Yet the most significant part of the 4QMMT document comes in the writer's final exhortation:

Now, we have written to you some of the **works of the Law**, those which we determined would be beneficial for you and your people, because we have seen [that] you possess insight and knowledge of the Law. Understand all these things and beseech Him to set your counsel straight and so keep you away from evil thoughts and the counsel of Belial. Then you shall rejoice at the end time when you find the essence of our words to be true. And **it will be reckoned to you as righteousness**, in that you have done what is right and good before Him, to your own benefit and to that of Israel (ibid, 364, emphasis ours).

Here, the writer says that by obeying the works of the law set forth in 4QMMT, one would be counted as righteous. Abegg says, “The final exhortation presses home the author's true point: to be accounted righteous, one must obey the Law as interpreted in [4QMMT].” For this reason Abegg concludes, “Probably the 'false brethren' (Galatians 2:4) that Paul opposed held a doctrine on justification much like that of the present writing” (ibid, 359).

Our point in presenting these findings is not to say that the false brothers in Galatia were necessarily Essenes. Rather, it is to show that the doctrine of justification by works (including obeying man's interpretation and additions to God's written law) was present and active in first-century Judaism, despite the fact that the Torah does not teach justification by works. The Essenes held to this doctrine, and clearly Paul's opponents in Galatia did as well. Paul is not against obeying God's commands. Rather, Paul opposes the teaching of man that says you will be counted as righteous by your works.

In verses 15 and 16, Paul argues that Jewish election does not make you any less of a sinner than Gentiles. In verse 17, he concludes that we are all found out to be sinners:

But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor (17-18).

This raises several questions. First, how does our endeavor to be justified in Christ (as opposed to by works of the law) result in us being found to be sinners? Note that seeking justification in Christ does not make you a sinner, but rather it “finds you out” to be a sinner. In other words, it shows your sin. In what sense? Simply that, if you are seeking justification in Christ and not in your own works, you are admitting a need to be justified. You are admitting that your own works fall short of perfection. You are admitting that you sin, and therefore, your own deeds cannot save you. Recognizing you are a sinner is an action consistent with the truth of the gospel.

Second, does this realization that we are sinners make Christ a servant of sin? As Paul adamantly says, “Certainly not!” Paul shows that real servanthood to sin comes not from justification in Christ, but rather from justification by works. “For if I rebuild what I tore down” is a reference to the barrier between Jew and Gentile, created by man-made laws requiring separation. It is directly related to the Peter-Antioch incident earlier in the chapter. Peter essentially had begun to rebuild what he had torn down. At first he fellowshiped with Gentile converts (consistent with the gospel), but when some influential Jewish believers arrived, Peter removed himself lest he be criticized by them for violating the traditions of the fathers, or customs of the Jews (inconsistent with the gospel). Peter was swayed by his familiar traditions and customs that defined righteousness and began to rebuild the barrier. He began to submit to the works-based teachings that says you must do certain things before you can be justified. Because Peter rebuilt this barrier, Paul says he stood condemned (2:11). Peter proved himself to be a transgressor.

This leads to a third question: How does rebuilding and submitting to the teachings of man prove yourself to be a transgressor? When you submit to teachings of man that are contrary to the Word of God, you thereby disobey God’s Word. You become a transgressor. Peter had submitted to the teachings of the circumcision party and withdrew from fellowship with uncircumcised brothers in the Messiah. He had disobeyed the Torah and the gospel. He had disobeyed the Word of God. Therefore he was a sinner.

Further, we must remember, these teachings were works-based. They relied on works for justification. When you rely on works for justification, you will fail to be justified because you will break the law. All people fall short of obedience (Romans 3:23). You will prove yourself to be a transgressor.

Therefore, the essence of Paul’s argument is that while justification in Christ may reveal our sin, it does not promote sin. Rather, justification by works promotes sin. When you rely on your own works, failure to be justified is the inevitable result. You will fail because all people sin – no one lives a sinless life. Instead, we must completely surrender our lives to Christ. Paul explains this in verses 19 to 21.

Dead to the Law and Alive to God

Here we find some of the most commonly used verses to show that God no longer requires our

obedience to the Mosaic Law. Let's examine them in context to see if that is what Paul (and God) teaches:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (19-21).

First, this passage emphasizes a death to myself. **I** died to the law, **I** have been crucified, **I** no longer live. This stands in opposition to a dependence on self, that is on my own works. Paul is once again showing that all those “works of the law” have not brought justification. My works cannot earn my salvation, and all they have amounted to is proving that I am a transgressor. But now in Christ, I have died to living for myself and depending on my own works, and now Christ lives in me. My justification is in him. I am made alive by Christ.

Second, there is an emphasis on our identity in Christ. I have been crucified **with Christ**, Christ lives **in me**, I live by faith **in the Son of God**. Whatever has occurred here, it has occurred through our identification with Christ. Because of his death, we too have died. Because of his life, we now also have life.

Paul says, “For through the law, I died to the law” (19). Let's consider in what sense our death to the law is through the law, or through the Torah.

The Torah testifies to the following things:

1. Justification is not by works but by faith (with Abraham as Paul's main example, to come in chapter three). In other words, the Torah confirms that justification is not and never has been by works.
2. The Torah is about the work of Christ. The Torah tells of mankind's need for Christ, and it creates a mural, picture upon picture, of the work that he would (and will) do. When Jesus walked with his disciples along the road to Emmaus after his resurrection, he explained the work of the Messiah that the scriptures foretold, beginning with Moses (the Torah) (Luke 24:27). We see the work of Christ in Genesis where Abraham is asked to sacrifice his only son, whom he loves (Genesis 22:2). We see the Messiah in Exodus, where the Israelites are commanded to sacrifice an unblemished lamb and place the blood upon the doorpost, that they might be passed over and their firstborn sons kept from death (Exodus 11 and 12). We see him in Leviticus, where sacrifices for sin are described in detail, calling attention to the ultimate sacrifice of God (Hebrews 10:12). Christ is our substitutionary atonement. Our sin is placed upon him. All of this and more is depicted in the Torah.

At this point, one might say, “Yes, I agree that the Torah depicts the work of Christ. But what does this

have to do with the works-based teaching that Paul is attacking in his letter to the Galatians?” The answer is this: In the Torah, we see again and again that man cannot earn his way into a right relationship with God, and that because of sin, he can only come near to God through the blood of a substitute. Christ is this substitute. If, after recognizing our need for this substitute, we attempt to earn our salvation through our own works, we nullify the very work of Christ that the Torah depicts.

The irony is this: justification is not through the Torah, but in another sense, it is very much through the Torah. To clarify,

1. Justification is not through the Torah in the sense that it is not by our own obedient works that we come into a right relationship with God. Our obedience to the Torah does not save us.
2. Justification IS through the message of the Torah because the Torah confirms the pure gospel message:
 1. Justification is by faith and not works;
 2. Justification is through the blood of a substitute.

So ironically, if we fully depend on the work of Christ alone for justification, we actually approach God through the Torah, that is through the Torah's prescribed means of justification: through faith, by way of the blood of a substitute.

What we so often fail to see is that the Torah is full of grace. God did not start with works and then change to grace. He is a God of grace from first to last. The Torah is a message of grace. When Paul attacks justification by works, he is attacking a teaching of man, not the former teaching of God. Recall this from chapter one and the beginning of chapter two. Repeatedly Paul attacks the teachings of man, such as those in the Oral Law. We have already discussed the Antioch incident above where Peter submitted to an Oral Law teaching that Jews must not fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles. This is not in the Torah. This is not grace. Rather, the Torah teaches the opposite.

This is why Paul can say, **“For through the law, I died to the law.”** Paul is saying, **“For through the confirmation of the Torah that justification is not by works AND through the Torah's testimony of the substitutionary work of Christ, I died to the law.”**

This leads to the second part of this complex verse: “I died to the law.” Many say this means we no longer need to be obedient to God's commands. Based on what we have learned so far, would the following idea make sense?

For through the law, I no longer need to obey the law.

Remember “through the law” refers to the Torah's teaching of grace. “Through the law” reminds us that justification is not by works. “Through the law” reminds us that we are accepted before God by the

blood of a substitute. It simply does not follow that because the Torah confirms that we are justified by faith, that we then do not have to obey it. Nor does it make sense that because the Torah testifies to the work of Christ, we no longer need to obey it. Rather, the opposite makes more sense:

Because the Torah confirms we are justified by faith, I will obey it wholeheartedly as a response to the grace of God!

Because the Torah testifies to the work of Christ, I will obey it and also be a testimony through my actions to all God has done and will do for me!

Clearly, Paul cannot be saying that we are free to disobey God's commands, for it simply doesn't follow from his premise "for through the law." So what is he saying? We know the context of Galatians two is that justification is not by works of the law. "Justification by works of the law" is a teaching of man, not God. Therefore, we can logically conclude that "I died to the law" means "I died to justification by works of the law." Now consider Galatians 2:19 with this new understanding:

For through the law, **I died to [my false belief in and reliance upon] justification by works.**

In other words: For through the teachings of the Torah, I died to the belief that my obedience to the Torah can save me.

If we recognize and confirm all that the Torah says is true (that the Torah teaches justification is not by works but by faith and that we need the blood of a substitute), then the teaching of man that says otherwise is put to death.

The last part of verse 19 reads, "that I might live to God." This is what we receive when we accept the gospel message. When we are justified by faith in Christ, we receive an abundant life that lives for God.

Verse 19 in summary might read:

For through the original gospel message taught in the Torah itself that justification is by faith alone and not by works, I died to the man-made teaching that seeks justification through my own works, so that I might be justified by faith, receiving new life for God's glory.

Let's follow the remainder of Paul's argument:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (2:20).

Here Paul stresses that our life (justification/salvation) is not through our own works but through the work of Christ--his death and resurrection. We are justified because we identify with him, not because of anything we have done, which is what the Torah has testified to from the beginning. This leads to verse 21:

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (21).

Again, the context makes clear that “righteousness through the law” means “righteousness through our own works of the law.” If righteousness (justification/salvation) could be obtained through our own works, then Christ would not have needed to die. This would nullify the grace of God, which essentially nullifies the Torah. Why? Because the Torah proclaims this grace. Remember, the Torah both testifies that justification is by faith and testifies to the work of Christ. Paul does not speak against the Torah. He speaks against using the Torah, or any works, for the purpose of justification. This misuse of works is what nullifies God's grace and the Torah itself. As Paul says in verse 14, it is not in step with the truth of the gospel.

The Galatians situation is ironic indeed. The Torah teaches the gospel message. Yet the Jews had turned the Torah on its heels, using it as a means of superiority and separation, thereby denying the gospel message that the Torah proclaims. Paul will have none of it.

Galatians Chapter 3

An Overview

In chapter three, Paul makes a distinction between works and faith because the Galatians have wrongly connected them – that is, they have connected them in the wrong way. The Judaizers are teaching that works are necessary for salvation. Here, Paul shows this is actually anti-Torah theology. The law itself upholds the true gospel message, that we are justified by faith and not by works.

As we begin our discussion on Galatians three, let's not forget that Paul has taken two previous chapters to contrast a religion of men, coming from men, and based on man-made customs and traditions, with that which comes directly from the Word of God. Paul has shown that his previous life in Judaism was learned from men, but that the gospel he preaches now comes directly from God. He rebukes those who elevate man-made traditions above the Word of God and encourages believers to live in light of the truth of the gospel.

Works versus Faith

Chapter two ends with Paul reminding us that if we could be justified through our own works, then Christ died for no purpose. Therefore, if we seek justification through our own works, we nullify the grace of God, claiming the work of Christ was not necessary (2:21). Chapter three opens on the same theme:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified (3:1).

Christ's death on our behalf is necessary. It is critical to the gospel message—we are only made righteous through the work of Christ on our behalf. Paul is baffled that someone has convinced the Galatians otherwise. The gospel message has been compromised.

Paul refocuses the Galatians on what brought them into a relationship with Christ in the first place:

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain — if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (Galatians 3:2-5).

Paul contrasts works of the law and faith, the effort of the flesh and the work of the Spirit. The gospel teaches we are saved by faith in Christ, not by our works. Interestingly, in verse four Paul references the suffering of believers because of the gospel message. Here we get a little insight into the Galatian believers' situation. They are apparently being persecuted for their commitment to the true gospel message. (Paul will mention this again later in 4:29 and 6:12.) Perhaps some of the believers are tired of the suffering and are therefore compromising the truth of the gospel for an easier, people-pleasing message.

Abraham's Example

Using Abraham as our example, Paul explains that the Torah teaches salvation by faith and not works.

... just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (6-9).

It is Abraham's belief that justified him – he was counted as righteous because he believed God's promise to him (6). Paul argues that those who believe like Abraham are the true sons of Abraham (7). Paul's point must have struck home to the Galatian audience. The Judaizers who were claiming justification by adherence to commands were not actually Abraham's children. Rather, the true sons of Abraham are those who respond the way Abraham did—with faith.

Note the term “the Scripture” at the beginning of verse eight. In context, the Scripture refers to the Torah, where the story of Abraham is found in Genesis 15. And here, in the story of Abraham, Paul says the Scripture preached the gospel. The gospel message is preached all the way back in Genesis. From the beginning, the Torah proclaims the true gospel message.

What was the basic gospel message found in Abraham's story? It is that, in Abraham all the nations will be blessed (8). In Genesis God reveals to Abraham that the Gentiles will have access to a relationship with God through Abraham's offspring, and this relationship will be obtained by faith, just as Abraham had faith in God.

Recall Galatians 2:19: "For through the law, I died to the law." Here Paul gives an example of how our death to works of the law is actually through the law. The law (the scriptures, the Torah) teaches justification by faith, as shown in the example of Abraham. God has always been consistent in the gospel message, from Genesis forward.

Through progressive revelation, the Bible further clarifies this gospel message: In Jesus, the nations will be blessed. To be saved, they simply must trust in his work on their behalf. They must believe the promise, just like Abraham. By trusting in the blood of the Messiah, we become sons of Abraham and receive blessing. However, if we do not trust in Christ, but rather depend on our works, we have a significant problem.

Under a Curse

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them" (10).

Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 to show that if you rely on works of the law for justification, you are cursed. Note that Paul is now not only referencing Genesis 15 (the Abrahamic covenant), but also Deuteronomy 27. This passage is part of a larger section that details the blessings and curses of the Torah (Deuteronomy 27-30; cf. Leviticus 26). Quite simply, the blessings come from obedience to God's commands; the curses come from disobedience.

What are the curses of the law? Some claim that the Torah itself is a curse. But according to the Torah, curses come when God's people disobey his commands. Deuteronomy 27-28 describes these curses in detail. They ultimately end in exile and destruction, being cast out of the Promise Land, out of relationship with God. Sin has dire consequences, separating us from God. Exile is a picture of death, and we see in Revelation the ultimate exile as the final consequence of sin: the second death at the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15).

So is the Torah itself somehow a curse? No, rather disobedience to the Torah brings a curse and ultimately brings death.

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will

not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, **that you shall surely perish.** You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them (Deuteronomy 30:15-20, emphasis ours).

In Galatians 3:10, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 to show that we are cursed if we do not obey everything written in the book of the Law. The problem is, nobody obeys everything, so all people are under the curse. We all face ultimate exile in the second death. The only freedom from this curse is trusting in the Lord to save us through the blood of the Lamb.

Again, we have the basic gospel message found in the law itself. Because of the false teaching of justification by works, Paul has to remind the Galatians of the simplicity of the gospel to combat the teaching of the Judaizers, who required works such as circumcision as a prerequisite to salvation. Our own works, whether obedient acts to the Torah or submission to man's rules, cannot justify us. Trusting in God and his provision of atonement and redemption is the only way to be declared righteous. If we do not trust him but instead rely on our own works, as many in Galatia were doing, then we remain dead in our sins and under the curse of the law.

Furthermore, if we rely on our own works of the law, we are essentially saying we are saved by our own standard of righteousness. This negates the need for a redeemer and negates the work of Christ to which the Torah points. Remember, no one perfectly obeys the Torah, so all of us are under a curse, and we need a redeemer. But if we negate the need for this redeemer, we remain under the curse, for we do not recognize the Savior.

Justification by Faith

In the passages that follow, Paul will deal specifically with the issue of justification and how it is achieved. Recall that justification is the declaration that we are legally righteous, achieved through the death of Christ, which is God's promise to Abraham fulfilled. Paul references the prophets, who, like the Torah, teach that we are not saved by our own works but through faith:

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith” (11).

Here Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4. The Greek word for “by” is ἐκ (*ek*), which means “out of,” so one might say, “The righteous shall live out of faith.” Interestingly, the Hebrew word found in Habakkuk for “faith” is אמונה (*emunah*), which means “faithfulness.” Faithfulness generally refers to obedience to the covenant, which is the Mosaic Law. Is Habakkuk teaching that the righteous live out of obedience to the Torah and not out of faith? Is Paul changing Habakkuk’s original meaning?

We have created a dichotomy between faithfulness and faith, yet in Hebrew, they are the same word. They are two sides of the same coin. Let's briefly consider the context of Habakkuk. Habakkuk had questioned how a holy God could let an evil oppressor (Babylon) continue to hurt God's people (Habakkuk 1:12-17). God responds and says that he will take care of Babylon in his time and that the righteous shall live by faithfulness/faith. Old Testament scholar Ralph L. Smith in his commentary on Habakkuk, says the following about chapter two:

Yahweh gave Habakkuk one more word of caution before he told him the answer to his question of theodicy. He said that Habakkuk needed to learn to wait. God's time is not necessarily man's time. Habakkuk wanted his answer immediately. He wanted God to punish the Babylonians and put an end to evil and oppression right then. God said that he had appointed a time for all that to happen but it might not happen immediately. Habakkuk, like all of us, was living "between the times," between the promise and the fulfillment. **Habakkuk was to wait in faith for God to act.** He was assured that judgment on evil would surely come. It will not be late (v 3). **But Habakkuk was not to wait with folded hands and bated breath for all this to happen. He was to live a life of faithfulness (v 4).** The evil one is puffed up with pride and he will fall (vv 4, 5), **but the righteous will live by being faithful to his covenant with God** (105, emphasis ours).

Smith confirms that Habakkuk says the righteous will live out of faithfulness to the covenant. They will live by being obedient to God's commandments. So how does Paul in Galatians develop a doctrine of justification by faith from this passage? Paul can do this because, as stated above, faith and faithfulness are two sides of the same coin. Habakkuk was worried about the situation with Babylon. He questioned what God was allowing to happen. God responded by telling Habakkuk that those who are righteous will not worry about what God is letting happen but rather will trust him to take care of the situation. They will demonstrate this trust in God by doing what he says. Their faithfulness to the covenant demonstrates their faith. Isn't this similar to what James says in his letter (James 2:14-26)?

We have spent this time understanding the context of Habakkuk to show that Paul cannot be using Habakkuk as evidence that we no longer need to obey God's commands. Obedience to God's commands (faithfulness) was what Habakkuk was commanded to do! To say otherwise is to completely misunderstand God's response to Habakkuk's question. Rather, in Galatians, Paul chooses to stress the faith aspect of *emunah*, showing that obedience to God's commands is not to be done FOR justification. Rather we live in obedience OUT OF faith. Again, obedience is a demonstration of faith. Obedience to God's commands is good. However, if we obey as a means of justification, we are no longer placing our faith in God, and this is the problem Paul addresses.

Paul has just stated that those who are declared legally righteous live out of faith (which demonstrates itself in faithfulness). He then says,

But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them" (12).

At first glance, Paul seems to have a negative view of the law, placing it as antithetical to faith. But this is not the case because Paul has just shown through Abraham's example and through his quote of Deuteronomy 27 that the law actually preaches the gospel message. Rather Paul's point is obeying the law is not a means of justification. He has just established that we are justified through faith. Yet the law is not of faith, meaning it is not a source of justification.

If the law is not of faith and if it cannot justify us, what does it do? It teaches us how God wants us to live, and it blesses us when we obey and curses when we disobey. Paul's support is Leviticus 18:5: "The one who does them shall live by them." Let's note a few things. First, the "by" that Paul uses here ("shall live **by** them") is not the same word as he used when quoting the Habakkuk verse ("shall live **by** faith"). In Habakkuk, recall Paul uses *ek*, meaning "out of." When quoting Leviticus 18, Paul uses the Greek word "ἐν" (*en*), which is "in." So in Habakkuk, the righteous respond (live) out of faith, and in Leviticus, they live in the commands.

What does it mean to live **in** commands? Does it mean that the Israelites were somehow justified and found in right standing because they followed God's commands? No, for this would contradict God's Word that we are declared righteous out of faith like Abraham and Habakkuk. Rather, the word "live" in Leviticus 18:5 is equated with blessing. You will be blessed if you obey what God says, if you walk in his commands. That is why Paul says, the one who **does** them shall **live** by them. The context of Leviticus 18:5 is not about how we are justified; it is about how we walk. When we obey, it brings life/blessing. These blessings are laid out in detail in Deuteronomy 28.

Understanding Galatians 3:12 in light of blessing perfectly fits the context of blessings and curses that Paul has already been addressing in Galatians three. Remember from above, Paul says all who rely on works of the law are under a curse (3:10), and that this curse is a direct reference to the curses in Deuteronomy that are a result of disobedience to the law. On the other hand, if you obey, you are blessed. You have life! The problem, like we said above, is that we all disobey at some level, and therefore, we all are under a curse. When Paul points out that the one who obeys the commands shall live by (in) them, the unspoken opposite is also true: the one who disobeys the commands shall be cursed by them. So, again, we are presented with a problem. The Torah is intended to bring blessing when we obey, but because we disobey, we are under a curse.

The Israelites had experienced exile due to disobedience, but the message is not just to exiled Israel. This is a picture of all mankind in exile due to sin. We are in spiritual exile. Throughout his letters, Paul demonstrates the extent to which sin separates all people from God. In Ephesians two, we were dead in our trespasses and sins (2:1), sons of disobedience (2:2), and by nature children of wrath (2:3); we were "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (2:12). In Colossians, we were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds (1:21).

All of us find ourselves under the ultimate curse of the law—in exile, separated from a relationship

with God, cut off from the covenants of promise because of our sin, because we disobey him. And ultimately, this results in the second death described in Revelation 20, an eternal separation. Yet there is hope!

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (13-14).²

Mankind's problem in a nutshell is that we are all under the curse. We are not receiving God's blessing. And there is nothing we can do by our own works to get out of this problem. This remains the case unless we are found to be in Christ. For in him, God took care of the curse and imparted the blessing. Note that Paul again uses the law to back up his theology (remember Galatians 2:19: “For through the law, I died to the law”), this time quoting Deuteronomy 21:23, which says, “his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.” Jesus was cursed by God because of our sin. Through his obedience to death on the cross, we now have received the ultimate blessing, which Paul explains is the gift of the Holy Spirit, resulting in eternal life.

We have received incredible blessing and life through the work of the Messiah. Does receiving this blessing mean we are free to walk in disobedience to God's commands? Now that we have been set free from the curse of the law, are we also free to continue in the very sins that put us under the curse in the first place? How can we who have been redeemed from the curse continue to walk in disobedience (cf. Romans 6:1)?

The Nature of Covenants

At this point, Paul discusses the relationship between covenants.

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise (Galatians 3:15-18).

²Some wrongly equate the law with curse, making the passage read something like, “Christ redeemed us from the curse, which is the law.” This misinterpretation reflects a misunderstanding of the promises of blessing the law contains, and worse, ascribes evil to God. Remember Jesus taught that if we humans who are evil do not give bad things to our children, how much more will our Father not give bad gifts to us (Matthew 7:9-11). The Torah was a gift given to us, for in it, we learn what will bring blessings and what will bring curses. Paul knows that the Torah promises life (Romans 7:10), but man's sinful nature causes him to violate the Torah and fall under the curses specified in the Torah.

Paul begins his argument by using manmade covenants as an example of a principle: no one can annul or add to a covenant once it has been ratified. He then applies this to biblical covenants: the Abrahamic covenant came before the Mosaic covenant. Therefore, the Mosaic covenant cannot annul or change the Abrahamic covenant.

What was established in the Abrahamic covenant? God promised that blessing (salvation) would come through the Seed of Abraham, which is Christ. Furthermore, God declared that Abraham's inheritance came by promise, not by works. Since God made this promise, he cannot make another covenant that is contrary to this promise (cf. 3:21). The Mosaic law cannot change what God has put into place in his promise to Abraham. That is why Paul says, "For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise" (18).

Paul is dealing with the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant, but the principle he makes can be applied to any covenant, man-made or biblical. He argues that no one can annul or add to a covenant once it has been ratified, and that a new covenant cannot annul a covenant previously ratified by God. Therefore, the New Covenant initiated by Christ cannot annul the Mosaic covenant, just as the Mosaic covenant cannot annul the Abrahamic covenant. All covenants will be consistent with previous covenants, and will not annul or change them.

Before moving on, note the reference to the singular "offspring" versus the plural "offsprings" in verse 15. Paul is again showing the gospel in the Torah (cf. 2:19). He argues that God's promise to Abraham points forward to his offspring (singular), which is Christ. He will build on this concept of singular versus plural and many versus one in verses 19 and 29 below.

The Purpose of the Law

So, if the law does not bring salvation, then what is the purpose of the law? Paul addresses this question next:

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made (3:19a).

Paul says, "[The law] was added because of transgressions" (19). What is transgression? Transgression is sin that is a violation of an expressed command. Pauline scholar Frank Thielman comments on this passage, saying "Paul probably means that God gave the Law at Sinai in order to reveal clearly Israel's sin, to transform it from something ill defined and inchoate into specific transgressions against God's will" (538-539).

In Paul's letter to the Romans, we gain insight into the law's purpose and how it is related to transgression. In Romans 5:13, Paul says, "For sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law." In other words, without a commandment from God, sin is not transgression because there is not an expressed command to violate. Sin is still wrong, but without

a given command, it is not transgression. Further, there is a greater level of accountability with transgression than with sin. According to Romans 5:13, sin without the law is not counted. In light of this, consider how Fung translates Galatians 3:19: “The law was given 'to make wrongdoing a legal offence’” (159). What is wrong has now become something that is a violation of what God has told us to do or not do, and God can hold us legally responsible. Through the law, God reveals his standard of righteousness. When we fall short of this standard (and we all do), then transgression occurs and we can be held legally responsible. Therefore, the law causes transgression to increase. Paul says in Romans 5:20-21:

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Why would God give opportunity for trespass, or transgression, to increase? Why would he give the law for this purpose? Paul answers that above by saying that as sin increased, grace abounded all the more. Through the law, we are shown to have violated God's commandments and are held legally responsible, and we are given the consequence of breaking his commandments (that is, death). What Christ did in becoming our sacrifice for sin is no small thing! All our transgressions were laid upon him. Every itemized sin of which we can be accused is accounted for and paid by him. God's grace abounds in light of the depth and seriousness of our sin. His grace abounds because he provided a substitute who met this standard of righteousness in every way and paid the price for our incredible failure.

However, let us not think that it is now acceptable to break or ignore God's commandments (his law) just because his grace abounds when trespass increases. Paul anticipates this very response in the verses that follow 5:20-21. In Romans 6:1-2, he says,

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? **By no means!**
How can we who died to sin still live in it? (emphasis ours)

Paul is adamantly against transgression of the law, especially in light of the sacrifice of Christ and our being united with him. Why then would we think Paul is preaching freedom from this law in Galatians 3:19?

Many have arrived at this conclusion based on the phrase “until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made” (19). Does this mean the law is no longer in effect now that Christ has come? No, rather it says the law was added **because of transgressions** until the offspring should come. The focus is on the fact that the offspring (which is Christ) has taken on our transgressions. It is the transgressions that have been dealt and “done away” with, not the law. Paul could have said here, just as he did in Romans, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in transgression now that the offspring has come? By no means!”

In verse 19, the singular “offspring” appears again. In verse 16, a promise was made to Abraham and

his offspring. Before Christ there is a waiting, an anticipation of the fulfillment of this promise. Without Christ, all we have is a law that cannot bring life. A law that brings curses as we fall short of obedience. A law that cannot save us and leaves us with condemnation because we break it. But then the “offspring” comes. While we already had the hope, the promise, now we have the fulfillment. The law revealed our transgression. But when Christ arrives, he atones for our transgression and brings us the inheritance, eternal life, through faith in him.

So the purpose of “until the offspring should come,” is not to say that the law ends and faith begins (for there was faith prior to Christ coming), but rather to show that without Christ, our situation is hopeless, but with Christ, we can put faith and obedience in their proper light. We are justified through faith, by what God has done. We obey, not to be saved, but because we love him and have given him our hearts and lives.

Paul continues with an often confusing passage referencing angels and intermediaries, their plurality, and God’s oneness:

... and [the law] was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one (19b–20).

Though it doesn’t say so specifically in the Torah, there was a general belief that the law was delivered to Moses by angels (cf. Acts 7:53 and Hebrews 2:2). The angels therefore stood as an intermediary between God and Moses. Paul brings this up to show its difference from the covenant given to Abraham. Recall in verse sixteen that the promise was given to Abraham and his singular offspring. There is a singular focus on Christ. Paul uses the angel’s mediation to stress the plurality of angels in the Mosaic covenant versus the singularity of God and the singularity of the offspring in the promise made to Abraham. In other words, we are talking about two different things, like apples and oranges. The law is not the same as the “offspring,” our Messiah. They are two different covenants accomplished in two different ways with two different purposes. One cannot override the other.

Now, let’s consider 3:19-20 in light of the overall message of Galatians, that justification is not by works of the law but through faith in Christ. Again, it reads,

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

In these verses, Paul is stressing that the purpose of the law is not justification. Rather, Paul gives the law’s purpose, which is:

- To define God’s righteous standard (what the response of the redeemed should be toward God and man)
- To define what sin is (the breaking of this standard)
- To reveal how we have fallen short and transgressed God’s righteous standard

In other words, it tells us what TO do and what NOT to do, and it reveals our failure to meet this standard. Paul's point: **the purpose of the law is not to save.** ³

Now Paul clarifies that he is not speaking against the Torah. Just as Paul does so often in his letter to the Romans, here he anticipates that some might misconstrue his teaching to be against God's law, and he quickly eliminates any such notion.

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law (21).

Paul is not speaking against the Torah, nor saying that the law is against God's promises given to Abraham. Rather, the Torah agrees with God's promise to Abraham. It is the teachings of the circumcision party that are at odds with both the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant, for these false teachers say that you are justified by works of the law, which is not what either covenant teaches. Paul hypothetically says, "If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law" (21). And if this were the case, the law would be contrary to the promises of God (the Abrahamic covenant). The point is obeying the law cannot give life, so righteousness cannot be by the law, which is exactly what both covenants teach. God's Word is consistent, and his covenants are consistent.

There is a weakness concerning the Mosaic Law, but it is not a weakness with the law itself. Rather, the weakness is in us. Without the Abrahamic covenant, and thus without Christ, all we have is the law, and we are lost. Paul says,

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (22).

As Romans 8:3 says, the law was weakened by the flesh. The weakness was ours (Hebrews 8:8a). The law, by itself, imprisons. We are left under a curse, under death, without Christ, and without faith in his work. We are utterly lost without him. Paul paints a picture of what justification by works looks like. It looks like prison. It looks like sin. It looks like death.

But thanks be to God, we are not left with the law as a means of justification. As the second half of 22 says, we have been given the promise by faith in Jesus Christ. We are no longer left imprisoned under sin.

Before Faith Came

³The timing of its giving demonstrates this. Israel was not saved because they received the law; they received the law because they had been saved. Circumcision's purpose was not to be the covenant, but to be an outward sign of the inward covenant. The Judaizers had it backwards, and they were destroying the Galatian believers. We discuss this inner versus outer issue extensively in our chapter on the book of Romans.

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed (23).

We might be tempted to read into this passage that Christ ushered in the era of faith, that is, there was an era of the Torah that ended when the Messiah came, and now we are in an era of faith. This would be an egregious twisting of Paul's message in this passage. Paul's primary example of justification by faith is Abraham, who trusted God's promises in Genesis 15:6. This faith came prior to circumcision and was counted as righteousness (Romans 4:3,9,22; Galatians 3:6). Jesus himself said that Abraham looked forward to his (Messiah's) day and saw it in faith (John 8:56). The writer of Hebrews enumerates a list of faithful servants in Hebrews 11 who trusted God's promises yet never received them. They saw them from afar (Hebrews 11:13).

What then does Paul mean when he writes, “before faith came?” The answer is seen in the second part of the verse “until the coming faith would be revealed.” In other words, the righteous patriarchs awaited, looked toward, and had faith in the coming of the Messiah, the righteous Seed promised to Abraham (Galatians 3:16). Here Paul personifies faith. “Before faith came” then means “before he in whom we have faith came.” In verse 24, Paul explicitly states that it is Christ who came. Christ is the embodiment of the promise to which all the prior patriarchs looked. In Christ we see the revealing of him in whom the Patriarchs trusted and hoped. It is not that before Christ, people relied on works, and now they rely on faith. Paul (and the rest of scripture) is clear that faith in the Messiah has always been the basis of salvation.

Under the Law

Another issue with this passage is the phrase “under the law.” In this verse, Paul says we were held captive under the law before Christ came. What does “under the law” mean, and how does it enslave? Does it refer to those who desire to obey God's commands given in the Torah?

In our Romans chapter, we discuss extensively Paul's use of the phrase “under the law.” While the English translation of Romans appears to show the phrase “under the law” starting in chapter two, the Greek is different in chapters two and three from the “under the law” passages that appear later in the book, starting in chapter six.

In chapter two, “under the law” is “*en nomos*,” which means “in the law,” and refers to the Jews who physically possessed the Torah. However, starting in chapter six, the phrase is “*hupo nomos*,” which literally means “under the law.” As we argue in Romans, when Paul uses “*hupo nomos*,” he is referring to the aspect of the law that increases sin or trespass among the unregenerate, resulting in the reign of sin. This is the “law of sin” (7:23), or “the law of sin and death” (8:2). Again, this law is at work in the unregenerate heart which does not trust in the promise of God. Thus, in Romans 6:14, Paul says, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” For the believer, sin no longer reigns. You are not under the law of sin and death, but rather are under grace. In Romans

6:14, “under the law” does not refer to our obedience to the Mosaic Law; it refers to the law of sin and death from which the believer has been freed. (For a detailed understanding of our argument of “under the law” in Romans, please read our discussion of [Romans chapters 5-6](#) and [Romans chapters 7-8](#).)

Likewise in Galatians, “under the law” does not refer to those who obey God’s commands. Rather, it refers to those who trust and boast in their own obedience to the law instead of in the promise of God. These people operate under the law of sin and death.

The Guardian

At this point in his letter, Paul introduces “the guardian” (ESV), or “tutor” (NASB, NKJV).

So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith (24-26).

The Greek word translated “guardian” is παιδαγωγός (paidagōgos), which refers to an adult male custodian or guide, “usually a slave, whose task it was to conduct boys and youths to and from school and superintend their conduct generally” (NIDNTT, 3:775). Before Christ came, the law was our guardian. In what sense did the law function as a guardian? The law was to guide us in right and wrong behavior. It showed us our transgression (19) and therefore, our need for a Savior. We even came under its discipline and correction (10-14) when we rebelled against God’s commands. Essentially, the law as a guardian revealed our helpless state (cf. Romans 3:9-20), with the goal of bringing us to the Messiah.

Note that Paul describes our situation in three similar ways. We were:

- imprisoned under sin (22),
- held captive under the law (23), and
- under a guardian, which was the law (24-25).

In this sense, the law as our guardian is negative, revealing our sin and showing our desperate situation. Yet it is only negative when it is understood apart from Christ. Without Christ, we are without hope, stuck in our prison cell of sin, with no way out. As New Testament scholar Tim Hegg writes,

It is the witness of the Scripture that all men, regardless of ethnicity or station in life, are in fact sinners, and therefore under the just penalty of their sin (“under sin”). They are “imprisoned” because left to themselves, they have no means by which to be made free. And the Torah itself offered no solution to this dilemma, for it gave no solution to overcome the power of sin (155).

When it comes to our righteousness, the commands of the Torah find us guilty. The Torah tells us what to do and what not to do, but it does not take care of our sin problem. However, as Paul has been stressing, when we understand that the purpose of the Torah is not to justify, and when we understand that the Torah reveals the basic gospel message, that justification is through faith in the promise of the

Messiah, we have hope like Abraham did. Verse 24 says, "... the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." And when we put our faith in Christ, who is the fulfillment of the promise, we are set free from our imprisonment to sin. The law, our guardian, showed us our sin; Christ freed us from our sin.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (3:25–27).

Paul does not argue that we no longer need to obey the law. Rather, he argues that in Christ, the law no longer functions as a guardian. The law has many functions or purposes, and its role as a guardian to lead unbelievers to Christ is simply one of its many purposes. For the believer, the law continues to play a vital role, to show us the way in which God wants his people to walk. Consider Psalm 19:7-11:

The law of the LORD is perfect, **reviving the soul**; the testimony of the LORD is sure, **making wise the simple**; the precepts of the LORD are right, **rejoicing the heart**; the commandment of the LORD is pure, **enlightening the eyes**; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, **by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward** (emphasis ours).

David praises God for his law and describes the many positive functions it can have: reviving the soul, making wise the simple, rejoicing the heart, enlightening the eyes, and warning God's servants. When we walk according to God's commands, we are blessed. These are all positive functions of the law.

The New Testament also affirms positive functions of the law for believers in Christ. James tells us that the law continues to bless the one who obeys, and he encourages his audience to look into the perfect law and be a doer of the word (1:22-25). Paul tells Timothy that the sacred writings (the Old Testament scriptures, to include the Torah) are able to make him wise for salvation and can be used for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:15-17). To the Romans, Paul writes that the law is holy, righteous, and good (7:12) and that he does not overthrow the law but upholds it (3:31). John writes that when we sin, we practice lawlessness (1 John 3:4) and that to love God is to keep his commandments (1 John 5:2-3). The writers of the New Testament knew that the law was able to teach, guide, and bless.

However, for the believer in Christ, the law does not act as a guardian that imprisons us because we are no longer found to be in a helpless state of failure. The law functioned as a guardian when we were apart from Christ, when we were depending on our own works, which, when measured up against God's law, fell short. But now, we have a much greater hope, not in our own righteousness but in the work of Christ.

Being under the guardian stands in strong contrast to our adoption as sons through faith in Jesus. Being

under a guardian means we are still lost in sin. But being a son means our identity is in Christ, the Son of God, whom we have put on. As Paul previously said,

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (2:20).

I have died with Christ. I have died to my previous attempts to be good enough. I now live for Christ, knowing that through his sacrifice and resurrection, I am forgiven. My sins have been paid for, and I can walk in obedience to him out of thanksgiving. Whatever I boasted in before is insignificant:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (3:28-29).

There is no human status that makes us better than another. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory and all are justified freely by God's grace (Romans 3:23-24). Instead of being under a guardian, trapped and without hope, we have been baptized into Christ and have put on Christ. Our identity is not in being a Jew or Gentile, a slave or free man, a male or female, but rather we are all one in Christ Jesus. Note the singularity – we are one.

Paul then makes a mind-blowing statement: we are Abraham's offspring (singular). Recall from verse 16, who this singular offspring is—Christ! He is the offspring. We have been baptized into him. We have put on Christ. Essentially, Paul is saying, we are Christ.

Of course, he does not mean this in the heretical sense. We are not somehow God. We are not the Messiah. But our identity is now so wrapped up in Christ that what is his is ours. All the good things the Father grants to the Son, he grants to us. The inheritance that belongs to him is now our inheritance. He is the heir, and now we are heirs according to promise.

Don't miss Paul's massive implication for the Galatian believers, and for us today. If we return to operating, not as sons, but as those under a guardian, we have no inheritance in the Messiah. It is absolutely critical that we do not seek our righteous status based on our own works. Paul cannot stress this enough, and will continue with this same idea in the next chapter.

Galatians Chapter 4

Chapter four is directly related to the ground work Paul has just laid in chapter three. He states the following:

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son,

born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (4:1-7).

Note that these verses contain the same themes of chapter three concerning heirs, guardians, and slavery/imprisonment. We must read chapter four in light of chapter three. Paul has established that without Christ, we are like slaves. Without Christ, the law functions as a guardian that tells us what to do and shows that we fail to meet this standard. Therefore, we are in prison. But when we trust in the saving work of Christ, we put on Christ and are no longer slaves but become as he is. We become sons of God and therefore have an inheritance in him, eternal life.

Here, Paul shifts his analogy from one in prison to a minor who, though he is heir to his father's estate, does not yet have full rights to that estate. Instead, because he is still a child, he is under guardians and managers and his rights are the same as those of a slave. In other words, he does not have his inheritance. Likewise, before we trusted in the promise of Abraham and came to know Christ, we were like children, lacking inheritance. With only our works to lean on, we were unrighteous and cut off from God.

Without Christ, we are like slaves, under guardians, enslaved to sin. The law functioned as a guardian before we came to know Christ because it showed us our sin. It showed us our need for a Savior. Its job was to lead us to Christ. Now that we know Christ, we are no longer under the desperation and helplessness we experienced when all we had was the law. Now we have put on Christ; we depend on his righteousness and not our own works. We are no longer imprisoned.

Torah was not the prison. Torah was the guardian that showed us we were in prison and needed the Messiah. Torah never taught works-based righteousness. Through the law, God taught righteousness through faith, but without Christ, there is no hope. There is nothing to trust in.

In this analogy, the minor is under guardians until the date set by his father. He is as a slave until his father releases him from the guardians and gives him the rights of his sonship. We too were once under guardians, and at that time we were enslaved to the elementary principles of this world (4:3).

What are the elementary principles of this world to which we were enslaved? Paul equates them with a child being under guardians when he says “in the same way” (connecting verses two and three). In other words, when we are governed by these elementary principles, we are enslaved, just as we were enslaved when we trusted our own works. We will discuss the Greek phrase “τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου” (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*), translated “elementary principles of the world,” in more detail below (4:9). There, we will argue that “elementary principles” refers specifically to the false teachings and traditions of man, which contradict and stand against the Word of God.

For now, let's relate this enslavement to what Paul has said previously. Remember in 3:22, he said that the scriptures imprisoned everything under sin. The scriptures themselves are not elementary principles of this world, but the very words of God (2 Timothy 3:16). As we stated in our commentary on 3:22, the law was weakened by the flesh (cf. Romans 8:3). When our unregenerate, sinful hearts (i.e. the flesh) encounter God's good commands (the scriptures/Torah), our natural response is to disobey. This natural response to disobey is what Paul calls the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2). What we are enslaved to is not God's commands, but our own sinful hearts. Because of our sinful hearts, we experience God's curses instead of his blessing. His law reveals the depths of our sin and describes how God justly responds to it. We are cut off from him.

But now God has sent his Son to redeem us from our prison so that we receive our rights as sons. The date set by the Father has arrived (4:2) and the fullness of time has come (4:4) because Christ has taken the curse of the law upon himself, freeing us from it (3:13). He became like us in every way, even being "born under the law," so that he could redeem us who were under the law.

Christ "Under the Law"?

This particular passage can be confusing and requires a closer examination:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Galatians 4:4-7).

We have argued that Paul uses the phrase *hupo nomos* ("under the law") to refer to those who know God's standard of right and wrong yet are helpless to obey it. Typically, *hupo nomos* is used to describe fallen humanity, who has refused to accept creation's testimony about the Creator (Romans 1:20), and of Israel, who has rejected the Torah and thereby incurred the penalties specified in the Torah in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

But here, Paul says the Messiah himself was born *hupo nomos*. Since we know that the Messiah is without sin, we know that he has not done anything that is contrary to the natural law or to the revealed law of the Torah. And yet, Paul says, he was born of a woman, born under the law. How can this be?

First, Jesus was born into a world that was *hupo nomos*. Jews and Gentiles failed to obey what they knew was right and found themselves in prison, hopeless, without a savior. As Romans 3 makes clear, all people were found guilty:

For we have already charged that all, **both Jews and Greeks, are under sin**, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is

under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God (Romans 3:9–19, emphasis ours).

In Romans 3, Paul quotes passage after passage to show that the scriptures themselves stand as witness against both Jews and Gentiles. All are without excuse and accountable to God for their sinful behavior. This is the world that Jesus was born into, of woman, under the law.

Second, Jesus came into this world to take on the wrath of God for us. He was in no way under the reign of sin personally, and yet he still bore the consequence of sin. In fact, no one has been under the law, experiencing God’s wrath, like Jesus. For indeed the prophet Isaiah has written of him:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned— every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities (Isaiah 53:4–11).

Jesus died to free us from the consequences we deserve, not from the righteous instructions on how to love and serve God and how to love man found within the Torah. God forbid that we who have died to sin should live any longer in it (Romans 6:2)! We have not been granted a license for disobeying the law, but rather a freedom from the condemnation of the law.

Christ bore the curse for us, and now we are adopted as sons (receiving the full rights of sonship) and are given the gift of the Spirit (4:5-7). Therefore, not only are we set free from the curse of the law, but we also are enabled to live a life, not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Consider Paul’s words in Romans 8:12-17:

So then, brothers, we are debtors, **not to the flesh**, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if **by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body**, you will live. **For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.** For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have **received the**

Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “**Abba! Father!**” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then **heirs**—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (emphasis ours).

Note the similar language here to Galatians 4:1-7, in which adoption as sons and the Spirit are connected, through whom we cry “Abba!,” through whom we are heirs. And Romans eight makes clear that it is this same Spirit who enables us to leave behind the flesh and walk in obedience to God. We are no longer enslaved to our sinful nature, to our flesh.

In summary, the key idea of 3:23-4:7 is that we are no longer under guardians. Those under guardians do not depend on the work of Christ but must trust in their own works, which fall terribly short. Those under guardians do not enjoy, experience, or share in the inheritance of Christ. Those under guardians are not Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to God’s promise (3:29). Paul pleads with the Galatians to understand the seriousness of remaining under a works-based salvation.

To What are the Galatians Enslaved?

Now, let's consider how this is related to the elementary principles of the world (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*), first mentioned in verse three, and again referenced in verse nine. This phrase occurs in the New Testament here in Galatians four, as well as in Colossians two, which we will study in more depth below. The Greek word *stoicheia* can have several different meanings, but at its simplest level, it refers to the component parts of a series or the elements that make up the physical universe (Fung, 189). It can also be used as an astronomical term (referring to “heavenly lights” or planets) and is even used sometimes to refer to the elemental spirits or deities (ibid). Based on its usage in Galatians and Colossians, many interpret the *stoicheia* as demonic forces and rulers (Esser, 452).

BDAG defines its varied usage as either the basic components of something or as “transcendent powers that are in control over events in this world” (BDAG, 946). It is greatly debated which of the two Paul has in mind in Galatians and Colossians. Some say he uses it more in the first sense of basic components, and that it therefore refers “to the elementary forms of religion, Jewish and polytheistic” (ibid). Others “hold that the reference is to the elemental spirits which the syncretistic religious tendencies of later antiquity associated with the physical elements” (ibid). Under this view, the elementary principles have a demonic source.

After introducing them in verse three, Paul speaks more of the elementary principles in Galatians 4:8-11:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles [*stoicheia*] of the

world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Before the Galatian believers came to know Christ, they were “enslaved to those that by nature are not gods” (8). They were worshipping pagan deities and thereby accepting falsehood as truth. Paul equates such worship to accepting “the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world” (again, the Greek word is *stoicheia* as in verse three above). Then, Paul says something that must have shocked the Galatians, who had thought they had left behind such falsehood. He says that they are again turning back to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world. Paul points to their observation of certain days, months, seasons, and years as evidence of their return to falsehood. To what is Paul referring?

We have at least three possible explanations:

1. The Classical Christian Interpretation

By submitting to observance of the Mosaic Law, the Galatians were accepting, yet again, weak and worthless elementary principles. In other words, the Mosaic Law constitutes these weak and worthless principles. Paul believes followers of Christ do not have to obey the law, and if they do, they are walking on dangerous ground. “Days, months, seasons, and years,” under this interpretation, refer to the weekly Sabbath, new moon festivals, annual festivals (such as Passover, Feast of Weeks, and Feast of Tabernacles), and Sabbatical years.

In one sense, this interpretation seemingly fits the context, as Paul has been discussing the law throughout Galatians, including its purpose and its misuse by the Judaizers. However, this interpretation drastically falls short when one considers what the New Testament tells us about Paul.

First, we have references specific to Paul celebrating or encouraging celebration of the holy days of the Mosaic Law.

For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 20:16).

The day of Pentecost is Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks (Deuteronomy 16:9-12). It is one of the festivals of the Mosaic Law, and here, Paul is eager to return to Jerusalem at the time of this feast. (See also 1 Corinthians 16:8 for another reference to Paul and Pentecost.)

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, he explains the significance of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. **For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival,**

not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Corinthians 5:6-8, emphasis ours).

Here Paul does not speak against observing this feast. On the contrary, he directs the Corinthian church to understand and practice the true meaning of the feast in their everyday lives.

Each of these references seems to indicate that Paul indeed kept the feast days of the Torah. Moreover, and perhaps most telling of all, the book of Acts describes Paul's observance, not just of the feast days, but of the entire law. In multiple places in the book of Acts, Paul is falsely accused of speaking against the law. In Acts, James even says that though the Jews say such things against Paul, these are false, and that Paul lives in observance of the law (Acts 21:24). If Luke accurately recorded the events in Acts, and we believe he did, then false accusations must have truly been false, and James truly must have said that Paul observed the Mosaic Law. This leaves us with a few options concerning Galatians: either Paul was a hypocrite who claimed to observe the Mosaic Law and taught against it at the same time OR Paul is not a hypocrite and never speaks against the law, not even in Galatians.

2. The “Paganism” Explanation

Another possible explanation as to what the elementary principles of the world refers to is that the Galatian believers were, on the one hand submitting to a false doctrine of justification by works, but at the same time, were also participating in the worship of pagan gods. The main support for this interpretation is that the Galatians:

- at one time did not know God and worshipped (were enslaved to) false gods (4:8).
- now are “turning back again” to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, which enslave them once more (4:9).

The idea is that the Galatians at one time worshipped false gods, and now apparently some were again participating in worship of false gods. Under this interpretation, the “days, months, seasons, and years,” would refer to the holy days of the pagan gods, of which there were many. The possibility that some of the Galatians were worshipping both the true God and idols is not far-fetched from a historical perspective. Throughout time, people have practiced syncretism, mixing worship of God with pagan practices (for some biblical examples, see Exodus 32, 1 Kings 12:26-33, and 1 Corinthians 10:14-22). Syncretism was expressly forbidden by God (Deuteronomy 12:30-31). Historically, Israel suffered the curses of the law for doing such things.

On the other hand, such an explanation does not seem to fit the context of Galatians as a whole, where Paul primarily addresses the Galatians' relationship to the law and their submission to the false teachings of the Judaizers. As Fung says,

Some interpreters see here a reference to (presumably pagan) 'astrological superstitions,' 'astronomical calculations,' or astronomically oriented calendar observances of certain

Jewish apocalyptic circles. The difficulty with this view is that it does not account for Paul's view of the observances as submission to the Jewish law (4:21) (192).

While Fung shows that some scholars hold to the paganism explanation, he feels that such an explanation does not take into account the overall context of Galatians. While the explanation from paganism may be a plausible interpretation, especially considering historical tendencies toward syncretism, we agree with Fung that it seems out of place contextually in Galatians.

3. The False Teachings/Traditions of Men Explanation

This third explanation argues that the elementary principles of the world refer to false teachings and traditions from man (as opposed to true teachings from God). Galatians 4:8-9 is explained in the following way:

- Before coming to know Christ, the Galatians were enslaved to false gods (a false teaching, not from God).
- Now that they know Christ, they are again returning to false teachings and traditions from man, not from God.

Though the specifics of the belief systems were drastically different, Paul connects the worship of pagan gods with the works-based system the Judaizers were teaching by saying that both are false; both are based on traditions of man and not God. Both lack dependence on the saving work of Christ. Remember that *stoicheia* in the Greek can have the sense of elementary forms of religion and/or teachings with demonic influence. Thus, Paul would be saying that both systems (false-god worship before conversion AND accepting of works-based religion after conversion) are elementary, inadequate, and not from God.

This explanation has contextual support from Galatians. Paul has already spent considerable time contrasting the teachings that come from man versus the teachings that come from God (especially in Galatians one and two, where this is a major theme, but throughout the whole of Galatians as well). He has stressed that the Judaizers' teaching was from man and not God, and that their teaching enslaves (Galatians 2:4). As Fung states,

The Galatians had been slaves to the *stoicheia* in the form of heathenism; now they were desiring to enslave themselves again to the *stoicheia*, and to commence them anew in the form of Judaism (192).

While Fung uses "Judaism" to refer to the Torah, we must remember that the Judaism of Paul's age was not Torah-based but included the teachings of man that were added to God's Word, such as the Oral Law. This is exactly what Paul is addressing in Galatians. Pauline scholar C.E.B. Cranfield says that *stoicheia* in Galatians 4:3 and 4:9 refers "...not to the law itself, but to the legalistic misunderstanding and misuse of it" (860). The Judaizers had come in and taught that works were required for salvation,

yet God says this nowhere in his Word. This is an added teaching of man, a misuse of the law, just as harmful as worship of false gods! Why is this? Because when you listen to man-made teachings over and against the Word of God, you put men in the place of God to determine what is right, what customs or religious practices to observe, and so on. As Esser states, “Thus ‘the elements of the world’ cover all the things in which man places his trust apart from the living God revealed in Christ; they become his gods, and he becomes their slave” (453). This will become all too apparent when we look at Paul’s midrash of Hagar and Sarah.

The view that *stoicheia* refers to false teachings and traditions from man has support, not only contextually from Galatians, but also from Colossians two, the other place where Paul uses this phrase.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, **according to human tradition**, according to the **elemental spirits of the world**, and not according to Christ... And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He **disarmed the rulers and authorities** and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him...**If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world**, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations — “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used) — **according to human precepts and teachings**? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting **self-made religion**, and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:8;13-15;20-23, emphasis ours).

While the situation specific to the Colossians passage is different than that of Galatians, Paul uses the term *stoicheia tou kosmou* (here translated “elemental spirits of the world”) in a similar way. First, note in Colossians the word *stoicheia* is translated “spirits,” which gives more of the demonic/spiritual sense of the word. This is also supported by verse fifteen, which refers to the disarming of rulers and authorities. Second, there is a clear connection between “elemental spirits” and the teachings of man. Paul refers to human tradition (8), human precepts and teachings (22), and self-made religion (23). Paul is stressing that the *stoicheia* are not from God, but are false teachings of man.

In light of this understanding of *stoicheia*, let’s reexamine the classical interpretation of the elementary principles of this world, which says they are the Mosaic Law. Could we possibly say that obeying God’s instructions given in the Torah is a false teaching of man? From whom did these commands originate, God or man? Are they not God’s instructions? To say the Torah had its origin in man is false. However, obeying God’s instructions given in the Torah **as a prerequisite for salvation** is a teaching of man. God nowhere commands obedience first, then salvation. In fact, every example in the Bible, Old Testament included, shows that God saves by his grace first, and then calls his people to walk according to his Word. In fact, doing any kind of work in order to be saved is a teaching of man, not God. Why? Because it is reliance upon self, rather than reliance upon God. That is exactly what Paul has been combating throughout his letter to the Galatians. He cries again and again, through a variety

of ways, “You are not justified by your works! Not by works of the Torah! Not by works of the Oral Law! Not by circumcision! Not by any works! Justification is by trusting in the work of Christ alone! Do not give in to the man-made teaching of works-based salvation!”

After examining all three explanations, explanation three is the most supported interpretation of *stoicheia*, both within Galatians, and in Colossians as well. How, then, does explanation three offer insight into Galatians 4:10, where Paul chides the Galatians for their observation of days, months, seasons, and years? There are a couple of options. One is that the Judaizers were requiring observation of these special holy days, again, as a prerequisite for salvation. This, of course, is another teaching of man, as God does not require his children to start observing these holy days before they can be saved. Remember the Israelites – they were first redeemed from slavery and then given God's instructions. They did not have to obey the Torah for a set time before God would rescue them from their Egyptian oppressors. The same is true of all his children. He saves us first, through faith alone, by his grace. Then he instructs us and we walk in obedience.

The other option is that the Judaizers were requiring observation of these days in a manner that followed man-made traditions. As an example, recall our discussion of the Essene sect of Judaism from chapter two. These same Essenes who taught that one was reckoned as righteous based on works, also had their own distinct calendar from the rest of Judaism regarding festival observation. Not only did they follow their own calendar, which was solar-based as opposed to lunar (whereas the calendar in the Torah is lunar) but they also included the additions of mandatory extrabiblical festivals (Abegg, *Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, 319). Thus we have an example of a Jewish sect that made changes and additions to the festivals as detailed in the Mosaic Law, and then commanded their observation in this specific manner. Perhaps the Judaizers were also requiring the Galatians to observe the festivals in a specific manner, outside of what is prescribed in the Torah. Regardless of which option is correct, the conclusion is the same: the Galatians were wrongly following man-made teachings, contrary to the teachings of God, and thus Paul feared he labored in vain (4:11).

In summary of Galatians 4:8-11, we know that the elementary principles of the world cannot refer to obedience to the Torah, for its origin was God and Paul himself obeyed it, even keeping the Sabbath, festivals, vows, and sacrifices. A possible alternative is that the elementary principles refer to syncretism within the Galatian church, in which believers worshipped both the true God and false gods, or worshipped the true God through the customs and traditions they had previously used to worship their false pagan gods. However, while there has been a historical tendency towards syncretism, this does not fit the overall context of Galatians, which is discussing the law and the Judaizers' misuse of works. A third alternative is that the elementary principles refer to the false teachings and traditions of man, of demonic origin. This is supported by the context of both Galatians and Colossians, where the phrase is also used. With this understanding, Paul does not speak against observation of the law, but rather speaks against the man-made teaching that one is justified by this observance. This third understanding is most reasonable and accounts for the specific context of Galatians, but is also consistent with the wider New Testament writings.

The Hagar-Sarah Analogy (4:21-31)

In this section, Paul gives an analogy based on the story of Hagar and Sarah to show the Galatians that legalistic observation of the law leads to slavery and that the inheritance (eternal life) cannot be obtained through our own works of the flesh. He begins by saying,

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? (21)

What does Paul mean when he says, “[Y]ou who desire to be under the law?” Paul has already stated what we “come under” when we seek to be justified through our own works: the curse of the law (3:10). When Paul here refers to those under the law, he is talking about those who seek to be justified through their own works, and who therefore are cut off from God and the inheritance he promises through the Messiah. This is consistent with his usage of “under the law” in other parts of [Galatians](#) and in [Romans](#). Justification (not) by works is the major theme of Galatians. Paul is addressing those who trust in works to gain the inheritance that God freely gives. One might rephrase this passage to say, “Tell me, you who desire **to be justified through your own works**, what does the law say?”

Here, Paul will use the Torah itself to show that seeking salvation through works of the flesh leads to bondage, and the inheritance is only received through the promise of God, by his grace. In the manner of his upbringing, Paul will midrash a teaching from the Torah to make his point. Recall from our discussion on Romans chapter ten that a midrash is an interpretation or extrapolated teaching of the Hebrew scriptures, whereby one shows the deeper and often hidden layer of meaning to the text. Here Paul will use the story of Hagar and Sarah to show that justification by works only amounts to slavery, whereas the promise of God leads to the inheritance.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise (4:22-23).

The story of Hagar and Sarah is found in Genesis 16 through 21. God promised Abraham that, although he and his wife Sarah were childless, from him would come a multitude of nations. However, for many years Sarah remained barren. Not seeing the promise fulfilled, they decided to have an heir by Abraham marrying Sarah's maidservant, Hagar (Genesis 16:3). Soon after, Hagar conceived and bore Abraham a son, whom they named Ishmael. Yet God said that the promised son would not be Ishmael, but rather would be the son that Sarah would bear in one year's time, and he would be named Isaac (Genesis 17:20-21). God fulfilled this promise, and Sarah, though previously barren, gave birth to a son a year later and named him Isaac.

In this story, the following occurs:

- God promises Abraham an heir, through whom would come a multitude of nations.

- Abraham and Sarah try to receive the heir through their own works, by Abraham marrying another woman (Hagar), who bore him a son through the flesh, since Sarah was barren.
- God says that the promised heir was not Hagar's son (offspring of the works of the flesh), but rather would come from Sarah, although she was barren. It would be by the power and grace of God that she would conceive.

Starting in verse 24, Paul begins to show the layers of meaning behind this story, which apply to the Galatians (and us today!):

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband" (4:24-27).

Before we unpack this passage, take note of the themes of promise, heir/inheritance, works, and slavery. Paul has been discussing these very issues throughout his letter to the Galatians. Again and again, he has stressed that salvation, our inheritance in Christ, comes through the promise of God. In contrast, seeking the inheritance through works leads to slavery. Remember what Esser observed above, "Thus 'the elements of the world' cover all the things in which man places his trust apart from the living God revealed in Christ; they become his gods, **and he becomes their slave**" (453, emphasis ours).

In verse 24, Paul states that Hagar and Sarah each represent two covenants. Hagar represents the covenant from Sinai, which is the Law of Moses. Paul says this covenant bears children for slavery. What does Paul mean by this? Could he mean that to obey the Law of Moses is to put yourself in slavery? This is a critical question, for many have used these very passages to teach that we do not need to obey the Torah, some going so far as to say we should not obey the Torah, for if we do, we will find ourselves in bondage.

Context is critical here or we will arrive at faulty conclusions and faulty application. Remember that Hagar represents achieving the promise through Abraham's own works, as opposed to relying on and trusting in God to bring about his promise of life through death (a living child through a dead womb – something humanly impossible). Paul is not saying that we are free to disobey the Torah. Rather, he is saying that we must not rely on our works, even our obedience to God's Torah, to achieve the inheritance. Salvation comes by way of the promise; it is God's gift to us, and cannot be earned or achieved through our own works, even if they are good, obedient works. They do not and cannot save.

Therefore, when Paul says that Hagar represents the covenant from Sinai, which bears children for slavery, he is talking about wrongly using the covenant for salvation. This is completely in line with

what Paul has already stated: “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse” (Galatians 3:10a). Relying on works of the law leads to the curse of God.

At the risk of redundancy, we say this again: The Mosaic Law was never intended to be a means of salvation. God says the following about this covenant:

The LORD called to [Moses] out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen **what I did** to the Egyptians, and **how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself**. **Now therefore**, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel” (Exodus 19:3b-6, emphasis ours).

God first redeemed the Israelites from the land of slavery. He “saved” them, not because they somehow earned or attained it through their obedient works, but because of God's promise that he would do it (Exodus 3:16-17). God promised, and he was true to his Word. When he gives the law to Moses, he says, “Now therefore...” (Exodus 19:5). Obedience to God's commands follows redemption. It is in light of redemption: salvation first, then an obedient response. The works are not part of attaining salvation, they are part of the response, a life lived in service to God. Of course, we cannot claim the promise while acting in rebellion (we cannot continue in sin that grace may abound). Paul strongly warns against this in 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 and Romans 11:21.

Verse 25 gives further support to the idea that Paul is not combating obedience to the Torah, but rather obedience for the purpose of salvation: “Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; **she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.**” Hagar and the law are related to the present Jerusalem. “The present Jerusalem” refers to first-century Judaism, which had a focus on external works for salvation. Consider what Fung says in his commentary on Galatians 4:25:

Representing Mount Sinai in Arabia, then, **Hagar corresponds to the earthly Jerusalem of Paul’s day, which was in spiritual bondage** together with her children just as Hagar was in physical bondage with her child Ishmael. Thus the fact of bondage (albeit in two different senses) holds together Hagar and Ishmael, the Sinaitic covenant of law, the present earthly Jerusalem (**which stands by metonymy for Judaism, with its trust in physical descent from Abraham and reliance on legal observance as the way of salvation**), and her children, that is, **all who adhere to the law as the means of justification** and the principle of life (208-209, emphasis ours).

First-century Judaism was in bondage because many of the Jews wrongly trusted in their election (“I am redeemed because I am physically descended from Abraham”) as well as their observance of the law (“I am saved by my obedient works”), instead of in the promise of God to redeem them through the promised Seed, that is Christ. Studying the gospels shows the legalism that entrapped the religious leaders of that time. Rules were meticulously followed while the heart of these rules was ignored (“their heart is far from me ... teaching as doctrine the commandments of men,” Matthew 15:8-9).

Additional “commandments of men” were added to those that God gave his people, and religious leaders required obedience to these as well. As we saw in chapter two with the 4QMMT documents, some Jewish sects like the Essenes taught justification by works. The idea of justification by works is a teaching of men, not of God.

Paul then contrasts the present Jerusalem in bondage with the Jerusalem above that is free (26). What is this Jerusalem that is above? Consider what Longenecker says in his commentary on this passage:

The idea of a “heavenly Jerusalem” (“the Jerusalem that is above”) has a rich Jewish background. The concept has to do with the culmination of God’s redemptive purposes in human history, the realization of God’s reign in its totality. As such, it is an eschatological concept that describes Jerusalem as it will be at the end of time, often in contrast to what the city is at present (213-214).

There are many references to the concept of a heavenly Jerusalem in the Old Testament scriptures, Jewish wisdom literature, second temple period apocalyptic writings, and in rabbinic literature (ibid, 214). Further, this idea of a heavenly Jerusalem that corresponds to the earthly Jerusalem is prevalent in the New Testament writings, in particular in Hebrews and Revelation. Again, Longenecker says,

This concept of a “heavenly” or “new” Jerusalem also epitomized the hopes of Jewish Christians, as in Heb 11:10, 14–16; 12:22; 13:14; and Rev 3:12; 21:2, where the full realization of God’s kingdom and Christ’s reign is set out in terms of a “heavenly” or “new” Jerusalem that was looked forward to by the patriarchs and is now experienced by Christians in inaugurated fashion (ibid).

First-century Christians had the hope of a heavenly Jerusalem, of which they were now part, though it had not been fully realized in an eschatological sense (Revelation 21). Consider how the writer of Hebrews connects Abraham and Sarah's story to this future hope of the heavenly city (also, take note of the themes of faith, inheritance, promise, and heirs that are also rich in Galatians):

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to **receive as an inheritance**. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. **By faith** he went to live **in the land of promise**, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, **heirs with him of the same promise**. For he was **looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God**. **By faith** Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she **considered him faithful who had promised**. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. These all died **in faith**, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that **they are seeking a homeland**. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, **they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one**. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has **prepared for them a city** (Hebrews 11:8–16, emphasis ours).

The “Jerusalem above that is free” is therefore a reference to the place of which all believers are citizens, the city that God has prepared for us. Just as Abraham went in to the land of promise by faith, so we enter the heavenly city promised to us, not through our works, but by faith in the Son of God. This Jerusalem is not in bondage, as the earthly one is, where its inhabitants are enslaved to a works-based righteousness and commandments of men. The Jerusalem above, like Sarah, is free, because it is not based on works but rather on the promise of God.

One other critical thing Paul states about this city is that it is “our mother” (26), or “the mother of us all” (NKJV). There are a few ideas we should note here. First, if the heavenly Jerusalem, which corresponds to the promise given to Abraham and Sarah, is our mother, then she precedes us. She is not something new, but rather is something that already exists. Hebrews 12:22-24 says,

But you have **come to** Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (emphasis ours).

It is something believers have come to, something that is already there which they are now a part of (cf. Ephesians 2:12-22). The heavenly Jerusalem represents a promise that was in place before the Sinaitic covenant. Remember what Paul said earlier in Galatians 3:17:

This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.

The Mosaic covenant does not annul the Abrahamic covenant, in which we receive the inheritance through the promise. The Mosaic covenant cannot step in, change what was previously established by God, and offer a new way through which we are saved. If this is how we understand it, then we incorrectly understand the purpose of the Mosaic covenant. It was not a way to achieve salvation. It was a way of life after a person was redeemed by faith in the promise of God.

Second, Sarah is the mother of **us all**, Jew and Gentile alike, who have been united in Christ. Paul is restating what he has already said:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, **then you are Abraham’s offspring**, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:28–29, emphasis ours).

There, he said we are Abraham's offspring; here he says “Sarah” (representing the heavenly Jerusalem) is the mother of us all. We are not children of Abraham and Sarah by genetics, but by faith. The children of Abraham and Sarah are and always have been by faith. Jesus himself supports this when he tells those who claim they are Abraham's children, that they are not because they do not do the work of Abraham (John 8:39). The work of Abraham is having a trusting faith in God, for he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). Paul tells us in Romans that those who “walk in

the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had” (Romans 4:12) are the children of Abraham. What an encouragement to the Gentile Galatian believers, who were not being treated as sons of Isaac, and what a shock to the Judaizers! Ironically, it was those who were genetically descended from Isaac (the Judaizers) who were spiritually following in the footsteps of Ishmael. Thus, at this point, Paul quotes Isaiah, saying,

Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband (Galatians 4:27).

We, in Christ, are the children of the desolate one. Sarah, who was barren, is our mother, and we are her spiritual offspring. Therefore, it is not those who attempt to receive the inheritance through works that are Abraham and Sarah's children, but rather those who trust in the promise of God to bring life from death. This does not mean they should disobey God's commands just as Abraham did not (Genesis 26:15); it means they are not saved by them.

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman (Galatians 4:28–31).

Paul affirms that the Galatian believers are indeed children of Abraham and Sarah, members of the heavenly Jerusalem. Then he reminds them of how Ishmael, son of Hagar, persecuted Isaac, son of Sarah. In other words, the one born out of an attempt to achieve the inheritance of God through human works, persecuted the one who was born out of faith in the promise of God. Paul shows that this is exactly what is happening among the Galatians. The Judaizers were saying the inheritance of God was received through works of the flesh, yet this has never been the case. What is Paul's, or rather, the Torah's, direction? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman” (30). The Galatians must not listen to the false gospel of the Judaizers. Justification is not by works. They must cast out that teaching.

Again, if we take this verse out of context, we might claim that Paul is saying we are to cast out the Torah, the Mosaic Law. Yet the entire context of Galatians is that justification (salvation, the inheritance, the promise, etc.) is not by works but by faith. This is what Paul is saying to cast out, this false teaching of man, this attempt at gaining the inheritance through your own works, just as Abraham first attempted to do through Hagar. If Paul is saying for us to cast out the Torah, then we are to cast out the very teaching that he is using to show that the promise is received not by works but by faith, for the story of Hagar and Sarah is found in the law. Remember, Paul said this himself: “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, **do you not listen to the law?**” (21, emphasis ours), and then Paul goes on to explain just what the law, or the Torah, actually teaches: justification is not by works but by faith in the promise of God.

No, we are not to cast out the law; we are to obey the law and listen to the law, and thereby cast out the false teaching of man that justification is by works. We can never let ourselves come to believe that we can in-debt God to us, or that God owes us, or that we can bring about the promise of God through our effort. But we must not misrepresent Paul's teaching to mean we no longer need to keep God's commandments.

Galatians Chapter 5

Chapter five begins with a call to freedom:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (1).

Paul says this in light of what he has already said, particularly in chapter four. Paul has just finished the Hagar/Sarah analogy, whereby he has taught that we are heirs and receivers of the promise of God, not by our own works, but through faith in God's promise. When he says, “[D]o not submit again to a yoke of slavery,” this should trigger our minds right back to 4:8-9, where Paul exhorts his readers not to turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of this world which previously enslaved them. As we discussed in detail above, these elementary principles are not God's commands given in the Torah, but rather teachings of man that stand against the truth of God's Word, whether derived from paganism or Judaism.

Paul then returns to the specific topic of circumcision:

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (5:2–6).

Recall these important ideas from our extensive discussion of circumcision in chapter two:

- The Torah does not require a Gentile to be circumcised before coming into covenant with God (Genesis 15; Deuteronomy 29:14-15; cf. Joshua 5:2).
- Abraham was justified through faith first, then received the sign of the covenant, which is circumcision.
- Circumcision is an outward sign of an internal commitment to God. Without this commitment, the sign is meaningless.
- Some first-century Jewish teachers were requiring (forcing) circumcision as a prerequisite to salvation. This is what the Judaizers were doing with the Galatian believers.
- We know Paul is not anti-circumcision, for he had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:1-4).

With these ideas in mind, let's turn again to the passage at hand. When Paul says, if you accept

circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you, he is talking about circumcision as a prerequisite to salvation. (Otherwise, he would be in the wrong for having Timothy circumcised in Acts 16). This is clarified in verse four, where he says, “you who would be justified by the law.” Paul is addressing justification by the law, not obedience to the law. He is (quite strongly!) saying that if you rely on your own works as a means of salvation, instead of on the sacrifice of Christ for our sins, then you are cut off from Christ. As he said before, you nullify the grace of God (Galatians 2:21). You will be obligated to obey the whole law perfectly, which no one can do, and without Christ, you will be left under the curse of the law (Galatians 3:10). Our hope of righteousness is not dependent on circumcision or uncircumcision—this counts for nothing concerning our salvation (6). Rather, we are saved through the Spirit, by faith (5).

Physical circumcision is supposed to be the outward sign of an inward circumcision, a circumcised heart. It is this inward circumcision that is important. The Judaizers were stressing outward physical circumcision, yet ironically, this was exposing the uncircumcised condition of their hearts. While attempting to earn their salvation through following the law, including compelled circumcision, the Galatians were at the same time acting hurtfully towards each other (15). They were stressing the outward sign (physical circumcision) while ignoring the heart that it was supposed to represent (demonstrated through loving each other). God does not desire circumcised flesh when those who are circumcised are hating each other. This is similar to what David says about sacrifices in Psalm 51:

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (16-17).

Many people stop here when reading this Psalm and say, “See! God does not care about the external but only the internal.” Yet the verses that immediately follow indicate differently:

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar (18-19).

According to David, God delights in the external sacrifices of bulls, but only when the sacrifices match the inward sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart. David is not saying God does not delight in the external sign, but rather that God will not delight in it if it is not accompanied by the internal sacrifice. If you read verses 16-17 without considering verses 18-19, you will completely miss this and misinterpret the passage.

Compare this with Jesus' critique of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. **These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others** (23, emphasis ours).

The Pharisees stressed what was external and visible to the world, yet their hearts were dead (Matthew 23:27). Jesus does not criticize their tithing; he criticizes their hypocrisy, which is demonstrated through their tithing on the one hand, yet neglecting the more important command to love their neighbors.

David addresses animal sacrifices, Jesus tithing, Paul physical circumcision. What do all these have in common? They are meaningless unless accompanied by a heart that loves God and others. Like the Pharisees, the Judaizers were focusing on circumcision while neglecting the greater command to love each other. Paul seeks to set this straight.

Paul continues with this same theme in verses 13-15:

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Some use these verses to support the idea that we no longer need to obey the specifics of the law as long as we love our neighbor as ourselves. Nowhere does Paul say this. Rather, he is stressing "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23), again showing that what counts is "faith working through love" (5). Love does not replace the law. Love fulfills the law. The law is all about loving God and loving your neighbor (Romans 13:8-10). If you attempt to keep the external details of the law without love, you completely miss the point. Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

David might have said, "If I offer animal sacrifices, but have not love, they are meaningless." Jesus might have said to the Pharisees, "If you tithe, but have not love, your tithe is not accepted." And Paul to the Galatians could say, "If you circumcise your flesh, but hate your brother, you remain as uncircumcised" (cf. Romans 2:25-29).

In summary, Paul is stressing the following about circumcision:

- Circumcision is not a prerequisite to salvation.
- The Galatians are acting hypocritically by forcing the external sign while neglecting the internal circumcision of the heart demonstrated through love for each other.

Paul continues:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. **But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.** Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; **against such things there is no law.** And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:16–24, emphasis ours).

In verse 18, Paul again uses “under the law.” Remember, it is important to understand how Paul uses this phrase (and other similar “under _____” phrases) in Galatians and as a whole, in order to understand his use here. As we discussed in detail in chapters [three](#) and [four](#), in Galatians when Paul refers to being under the law, he uses the phrase *hupo nomos*, addressing those who are in bondage because they seek justification through their own works. Related phrases in Galatians include “under sin,” “under a curse,” and “under a guardian,” similar to the phrase “the law of sin and death” in Romans 8:2.

In this passage, Paul continues to use “under the law” in a similar sense. The desires of the flesh are contrasted with the desires of the Spirit (16-17). Similarly, those who are under the law are contrasted with those who are led by the Spirit (18). Paul is connecting those who gratify the desires of the flesh with those who are under the law. He has already shown that relying on our own works of the flesh leads to bondage; we are not saved through our works (Galatians 4:23-25). Now he goes on to expose exactly what our works of the flesh are: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these” (19-21). This is so clearly demonstrated through the Galatians actions: while they tried to be justified by their own works of the flesh (physical circumcision), they acted hatefully toward each other. That is what their works of the flesh amounted to! The opposite of what the law teaches: hate.

But, if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Your heart is regenerated. You do not rely on your own works of the flesh, and you do not show hate to your neighbor. Instead, you exhibit the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (22-23). Paul says, “Against such things, there is no law” (23b). The point is that there IS a law against the actions of those who gratify the desires of the flesh; their sinful actions are unlawful. But not so for those who are led by the Spirit. There is no law **against** their actions because their actions epitomize the law. The fruit of the Spirit is the heart of the law, the law in action. Paul emphasizes this to show that those who think they are righteous because of their works (like circumcision) in actuality break the law. Yet those who are led by the Spirit, fulfill, or obey, the law.

Galatians Chapter 6

In chapter six, Paul continues the same theme of loving each other:

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (2).

This needs little explanation in light of chapter five. The person who follows and fulfills the law is the one who loves his brother. The Galatians, so focused on the external elements of the law such as physical circumcision, were neglecting their duty to love each other.

Finally, Paul returns again to the topic of circumcision. He begins with, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand" (11). Whether Paul dictated the letter up to this point or wrote the entire letter in his own hand is debated. In either case, the importance of this verse is that Paul is stressing that the readers ought to take note of what Paul is saying (either here in his closing or the letter as a whole), for he writes the words himself. As Fung states, "The fact that these verses are written in Paul's own hand and are written in unusually large letters is an indication of their special importance" (301). By stating that he is writing the words, with large letters no less, Paul emphasizes his message, which is a restatement of what he has said all along:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God (6:12–16).

Note, again, that the circumcision is forced ([see chapter two](#)), and Paul is right to take issue with this. Circumcision is not a requirement for or prerequisite to salvation and should not be forced upon anyone. Paul goes on to say that those who are forcing circumcision are doing it for "a good showing . . . that they may not be persecuted" (12) and "that they may boast in your flesh" (13). The Judaizers were circumcising as an external sign to gain man's approval, but cared little about the internal condition of their hearts. This is reminiscent of Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees:

They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues (Matthew 23:5–6).

Paul can rightfully say that the Judaizers, though circumcised, do not themselves keep the law (13; cf. Romans 2:17-29). Why? Because they are not acting in love for each other, as we discussed in detail in the last chapter. Paul is again revealing their hypocrisy.

In verse 15 Paul repeats the same idea as he did in 5:6, yet this time he replaces "faith working in love" with "a new creation." The idea, however, is similar. The external sign (physical circumcision, or lack thereof) is meaningless without the internal change: the new creation that we have become in Christ.

“A new creation” represents the circumcision of our hearts by the Spirit, and that is what counts. Whether or not we are circumcised does not affect our acceptance into God's kingdom. On the other hand, our being made into a new creation by the work of Christ, through the power of the Spirit, is of utmost importance.

Galatians Conclusion

Many consider Paul's letter to the Galatians to be solid proof that believers in Christ are under no obligation to keep the Mosaic Law (Torah). In fact, some go so far as to say that believers should not obey the law, for if they do, they are enslaving themselves. However, upon closer examination of this letter, we see that is not the case. Paul does not encourage lawlessness. He does not advocate freedom to disobey God's instructions. His focus is on something all together different. Let's consider where we have been.

Paul contrasts two approaches to relationship with God, and only one is consistent with the truth of God's Word. The gospel teaches that we are saved through the promise of the Messiah. It is only through the work of Christ that we are declared to be sons of God and heirs of the promise. But some trouble makers in the Galatian churches were teaching that there were certain prerequisites to salvation, such as circumcision. Therefore, for Gentile believers especially, there was a roadblock to acceptance as a redeemed child of God.

Paul is appalled by this false teaching that stands as an affront to the work of Christ and a stumbling block to current and potential believers. He spends six chapters showing its foolishness and inconsistency with God's Word.

In chapters one and two, Paul emphasizes that his message is from God and contrasts the teachings of God with the teachings of man. The gospel Paul preaches is from God and brings freedom, whereas the message of the Judaizers has its origin in man and therefore enslaves. Paul addresses some of these teachings of man. Specifically, he focuses on the man-made teaching that requires circumcision as a prerequisite to salvation. The essence of such a teaching is that works are required for justification, that one must first be circumcised and then can inherit salvation. This is contrary to the entirety of God's Word, beginning with the institution of circumcision with Abraham and continuing throughout the scriptures. Salvation is and always has been through faith, not by works.

In chapter three, Paul expounds on the same theme. He argues that all who seek to be justified by their own works are found to be under the curse of the law because, by trusting in their own works to save them, they have broken the Torah. The law itself is not the curse, but rather, the curse is the consequence for disobeying the law, as detailed in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27-30. Paul shows that God's instructions for his people (the law, or Torah) are being misapplied when used for justification because this was never their purpose. He then discusses the purpose of the law, showing that it does not save, but rather creates a standard of righteousness by which we can be held

accountable for our sins. Before we accepted Christ, the law functioned as a guardian, whose job was to lead us to Christ. It revealed our sin and our hopelessness because our own works fell short. Now that we have believed in the Messiah, the law no longer has this function. We are no longer imprisoned to sin, but have put on Christ and are declared to be Abraham's offspring and heirs of the promise. We are no longer under a curse, for he has taken the curse upon himself and given us the blessing promised to Abraham.

In chapter four, Paul addresses two often misunderstood ideas. First, he discusses the elementary principles of the world, which many think refer to the law. However, based on the context, these elementary principles refer to teachings which come from man and not God. It is these teachings that enslave, just as Paul argues in chapters one and two. The specific man-made teaching that Paul addresses is that of justification by works of the law. This teaching enslaves. Second, in chapter four we consider the allegory of Hagar and Sarah. Hagar represents trying to attain the promise of God through our own works, whereas Sarah represents relying on and trusting in God to bring about his promise.

Finally, in chapters five and six, Paul again returns to the issue of circumcision. Circumcision is supposed to be an external sign that represents an internal circumcision of the heart. Herein lies the irony: the Judaizers were forcing circumcision (contrary to the Torah), and were thereby showing the uncircumcision of their own hearts. Paul argues that what matters is a demonstration of love for one's brothers. If a person has a circumcised heart, love will be the result. He is made into a new creation. The Judaizers thought they were saved because of their outward circumcision, yet by forcing this, they demonstrated the uncircumcision of their hearts. Paul seeks to redirect the Galatians' focus to the internal matters, which are of utmost importance.

Throughout Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul argues against following the teaching of man that says we are justified by our works. He shows that when we actually listen to what the law says, we see that justification is by the grace of God. Therefore, justification by works (a teaching of man) stands contrary to justification by God's grace (what God teaches in his Word). Paul does not encourage disobedience to the Torah, but rather encourages us to listen to the Torah. What Paul speaks against is using our own works, even our acts of obedience to God's law, to ensure our justification. He rightly takes a strong stance against this teaching of man, for it opposes what the Torah and the entire Word of God teaches.

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