



o8. Galatians 3:15 – 4:11

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## Galatians 3:15

Paul's first argument was to ask the Galatians to reflect upon their experience of the Spirit (3:1-5). His second argument was from the scriptures (3:6-14). He now moves to his third argument: 'an example from daily life'.

<sup>15</sup>Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it.

Paul will go on to say that God revealed his will to Abraham. It cannot be changed by the Law which came much later.



## Galatians 3:16-18

<sup>16</sup>Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, 'And to offsprings', as of many; but it says, 'And to your offspring', that is, to one person, who is Christ. <sup>17</sup>My point is this: the law which came four hundred thirty years later does not annul a commitment (διαθήκη) previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. <sup>18</sup>For if the inheritance comes from the law, it is no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.



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Paul turns to the commitment which God made to Abraham. It consisted in a promise concerning Abraham's 'seed'. Now it is obvious from the text in Genesis 17:8, that this refers to Abraham's descendants. However – and this goes back to what we said earlier about Paul seeing new meanings in the scripture in the light of Jesus – Paul offers a new interpretation. He sees this promise as fulfilled in Jesus.



Paul then makes the point that follows from his analogy. Whatever the purpose of the law, **it came four hundred thirty years later**. It cannot alter the promise which God made to Abraham – a promise that was not dependent on observing a law which did not yet exist.

Does Paul get the figure 430 from the calculation of the time spent in Egypt: ‘The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years’ (Exodus 12:40)? Genesis 15:13 puts the figure as four hundred years. This is followed by Luke in Acts 7:6.



Paul has argued from experience, from scripture, and from the time-lag between Abraham and Moses, to show that the law was never meant by God to be the basis for our being in communion with God. If the Gentiles experience the promised Spirit without the law, and if Jesus has liberated the Jews from the threat of punishment attached to it, what was its purpose?



## Galatians 3:19

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made

The law ‘was added because of transgressions’ (παράβασις). Note that he says ‘transgressions’, not ‘sin’ (ἁμαρτία). Sin has always been part of the human condition. But sin can remain hidden. Law had the effect of bringing sin into the open, because it reveals sin as a direct contravening of God’s will expressed in the law. It is this contravening of law which constitutes a transgression. Our inability to keep God’s law alerts us to the need for forgiveness and for redemption if we are to be able to live in communion with God. But it did not have the power to actually forgive transgressions.

Furthermore the law was only ‘until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made.’



## Galatians 3:19-20

<sup>19</sup>The law was ordained through angels by a mediator. <sup>20</sup>Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.

When Jesus came and the promise was fulfilled, the law was superseded. Paul adds a subsidiary argument to highlight the fact that the promise is of more importance than the law. The promise was made directly by God himself to Abraham, whereas the law, according to a common opinion among the Jewish scholars at Paul's time, was promulgated indirectly, through angels, and by a mediator, Moses.



## Galatians 3:21-22

<sup>21</sup>Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. <sup>22</sup>But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised might, through the faith of Jesus Christ, be given to those who believe.



The law and the promise are not in opposition. The law, however, has an inherent and basic limitation: it cannot give life and so it cannot 'justify' – it cannot put us in a right relationship with God. It is true that the scripture often states that people will live if they keep the law (see Galatians 3:12; Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 32:47). The weakness of the law is that it does not give us the ability to keep it.

The law shows us what is wrong. It passes judgment on us when we fail to observe it. This is good in that it makes sin appear to be what it really is, and so 'through the law' we can come to realise our need and cry out for redemption. Paul is inviting his readers to recognise in Jesus the answer to that cry, and not to let the law stop them from inheriting the promise 'given to those who believe' (compare Romans 11:32).



## Galatians 3:23-25

<sup>23</sup>Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup>Therefore the law was our disciplinarian [παιδαγωγὸς] until Christ came so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

The disciplinarian to whom Paul refers was the person responsible for disciplining a child prior to his or her reaching maturity. This included seeing to the child's education. Paul makes an apt comparison between the custodian and the law. The law 'imprisoned and guarded' people until the time came when they attained maturity, Then it brought them to Christ their true teacher, who taught us to believe and who gave us a share in his faith that we might share the communion he has with the Father.



Nothing Paul says about the law in any way denies that it was a precious gift from God, and a gift that Paul respects. Luke has Paul say: 'I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets' (Acts 24:14).

The law is precious, but is of limited value. It pointed to Christ, who lived it perfectly, but who also went beyond it. The life of God's Spirit, as promised, has been poured out upon the Galatians by God. The law must not be used to take Jewish Christians away from the one who fulfils in his person the promises that are the very reason for Israel's existence as a people. Nor must it be used to seduce Gentiles into finding their security in its observance rather than in their communion with Jesus.



## Galatians 3:26

‘You are all ‘sons’ of God through the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

In this, his fourth argument, Paul focuses on their experience of conversion. Earlier, when speaking of his own conversion, Paul wrote that ‘God was pleased to reveal his Son to/in me’ (1:16). A son receives life from his father; he also receives instruction from him. A son hands on to his children the life and enlightenment that he has received from his father. Christian conversion involves a recognition of the truth that in these ways Jesus is related to God. This includes the fact that God, the Father of Jesus, wishes to pour out his Spirit into those who open their hearts and minds to communion with his Son (3:2).



‘You are all ‘sons’ of God through the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

The desire to use inclusive language encourages the translation ‘children’ in verse twenty-six. It is important, however, to stay with Paul in using ‘sons’, because Paul is focusing not primarily on our relationship as children to God, but on our being one with the Son through sharing his life.



## Galatians 3:27

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

To understand the significance of baptism for Paul we should begin with the account of Jesus' baptism:

‘Jesus was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’ (Mark 1:9-11).





At the time of their conversion, the Galatians received the same Spirit, poured out on them by the risen Christ. It was this Spirit who created a bond of consecration between the Christian and Christ, and so between the Christian and all those already in communion with Christ. To each Christian the Father says: 'You are my beloved son/daughter; with you I am well pleased'. The acceptance of God's grace, the conversion to a new way of life, and the acceptance of the convert into the community, all found expression in the ritual of baptism. Having been 'clothed in Christ', the convert lived 'in Christ', surrounded by his love in the community of his disciples.



Baptism is a sacramental initiation into the family which can say to God, with Jesus, 'Abba! Father!' Those who belong to this family are already, without any reference to the law, sons and daughters of God and heirs of the promise. Let Jews remain Jews. Let Gentiles remain Gentiles. What matters is that we are in communion with Jesus.



## Galatians 3:28-29

<sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.'

What matters now is that a person, initiated into the Christian community through baptism, is living a new life, sharing in the life of the risen Christ and so experiencing being a child of God in a new way. While baptism does not change one's sexual, social or economic position in society, being a member of the Christian community does bring all these and other relationships under the scrutiny of the gospel. No institution or set of relationships can remain the same once we open ourselves to Jesus' Spirit.



Nowhere in Paul's letters do we find a direct critique of the injustices that existed in the slave-system or between the sexes. What we do find, however, is a powerful concentration on Jesus, on the way he lived and the way he died, and especially on the love which he revealed on the cross. Paul does not set out to create a new social system. God is the creator, not Paul, and he knows that God is a God of justice. If our focus is on Jesus and we are sensitive to the inspiration of God's Spirit, the changes that God inspires will come about, at the time and in the way known best to God.



Such a perspective, and such a commitment to what Paul calls elsewhere 'the obedience of faith' (Romans 1:5), could not but profoundly affect all areas of human behaviour, including those just mentioned. We who have seen many centuries of Christian history cannot use Paul as an excuse for our failure to face the implications of his teaching.



It must have been very exciting to experience the liberation of belonging to a Christian community. In later letters, particularly in the Corinthian correspondence , we see some of the abuses to which this excitement led. In this letter we are watching ways in which certain Christians pulled back from the implications of this freedom. Paul does not claim to have everything in exactly the right perspective either. But he does passionately insist that we keep our focus upon Jesus, for he knows that without this focus nothing will go right. Only if we live in Christ can we experience true justice (can we be 'justified').



## Galatians 4:1-2

## Galatians 4:1-2

<sup>1</sup>My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; <sup>2</sup>but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.

In the previous passage, Paul spoke of all those baptised into Christ, whatever their ethnic, social or sexual identity, as having received a new life, the life of the Son, and as being, therefore, ‘sons’ of the one Father (3:26).

Paul now makes the point that, as ‘sons’ we are also heirs. We came into our inheritance at the time determined by our Father



<sup>3</sup>So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.

Before the time appointed by God, before the time of Jesus' redeeming love, and before people, including Paul and the Judaeans missionaries and the members of the churches in Galatia, whether Jew or Gentile, learned to believe in God's love as revealed in Jesus, everyone was living as a slave. Paul will have a lot more to say about the various forms of slavery that keep people bound. Here, addressing himself especially to the Gentiles, he speaks of '**the elemental spirits** (στοιχεῖα) **of the world**'. He may be referring simply to their relying on principles that do not go beyond this present world. Or he may be referring to the various pagan gods and goddesses which were projections of the various elements of nature.



## Galatians 4:4-7

<sup>4</sup>When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup>in order to **redeem** those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as ‘sons’. <sup>6</sup>And because you are ‘sons’, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” <sup>7</sup>So you are no longer a slave but a ‘son’, and if a ‘son’ then also an heir, through God.’

We came into our inheritance when we opened our hearts to receive the self-giving love of God in Jesus, and the inheritance was the experience of Jesus’ Spirit in our hearts. We received ‘the promise of the Spirit through faith’ (3:14). We know this because we found ourselves caught up in Jesus’ own prayer, crying out to God as our ‘Abba!’



## Galatians 4:8-9

<sup>8</sup>Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are no gods. <sup>9</sup>Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?

The experience which people had of Jesus led them to a new way of thinking about God. Jews, faithful to their heritage, held to the truth that God is one. They recognised, therefore, that everything that exists belongs to everything else, for there is but one source of being. At the same time, Jesus' disciples could not think of God any more without thinking of Jesus and of the love of the heart of Jesus for the one he called Father.



It was this communion of love, this divine Spirit of love, that they experienced in their own hearts when they were in communion with Jesus. Jesus' disciples came to perceive that God is one, not in transcendent individual isolation, but because God is communion in love. It is this divine love which they experienced in Jesus and in which they shared. It could be said of Jewish Christians – and Paul would be the first to admit it of himself – that before they came to know Jesus they 'did not know God'.

Observance of the law prior to what God has revealed in Christ is one thing. To cling to this observance when it means turning away from the life which they have in Christ is another.



Here, however, Paul's primary concern is for the Gentiles in the community, for they are the ones most at risk from the pressure being brought to bear upon them by the Judaeian missionaries. They, too, though in a different way, did not know God 'formerly' (witness the scene in Lystra, Acts 14:11-17). Through coming to know Jesus, they have come to know God, and Paul cannot bear to think of them turning away from this communion, and turning to the law. It would be as though they were going back to their pagan ways.



## Galatians 4:10-11

<sup>10</sup>You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. <sup>11</sup>I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

When Paul speaks of ‘days and months and seasons and years’ he is not criticising festal celebrations. There is evidence that he himself observed the Sabbath (Acts 13:14,44; 18:4), celebrated the first day of the week (Acts 20:7 – the day of the Resurrection), and that he celebrated Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7) and Pentecost (Acts 20:16).

Rather, he is castigating a superstitious mentality that finds its security in such celebrations. It is possible that he also has astrological charts in mind.



Paul begins by making a contrast between not knowing God and knowing God. Note how he corrects himself in mid-sentence: <sup>9</sup>Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.

Yes, it is good to know God, but, like our faith in God, this is only ever a response to something that God has done and is doing in knowing us, in love.