

*“Gospelizing” the Faithfulness of Christ Among the Gentiles:
A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians*

Diocese of West Texas

Spring & Fall 2010

Study and Reflection Session 4:

Gal 3:1-4:11: Becoming “Sons of God” Through Christ’s
Faithfulness

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

Translation of Gal 3:1-5

Galatians 3:1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! **2** The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit from works of the Law [*ex ergōn nomou*] or from a hearing of faithfulness [*ek akoēs pisteōs*]? **3** Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now being completed in the flesh? **4** Did you suffer so much for nothing? – if it really was for nothing. **5** Well then, is God supplying you with the Spirit and working powerful deeds among you from works of the Law [*ex ergōn nomou*], or from a hearing of faith [*ek akoēs pisteōs*]?

Commentary on Gal 3:1-5

In Galatia, Paul embodied “Christ crucified.” Paul reminds the Galatians that they witnessed firsthand, with their very own eyes, a *living illustration* of “Christ crucified” through Paul himself.

- Paul’s first visit to Galatia was precipitated by what he later calls a “physical infirmity” (see Gal 4:13).

- Though we cannot know for sure, this “physical infirmity” may have been the consequence of persecution from Paul’s fellow Jews.
- Paul characterizes this persecution and suffering as a living example Christ crucified, with the Galatians as witnesses to Paul’s “living sacrifice” (see Rom 12:1).

Paul points to the Galatians as proof that observance of the Torah is not required. As evidence, Paul reminds the Galatians’ that they first *experienced* the Spirit and the powerful deeds that God worked among them without regard to observance of the Jewish Law.

- God supplies the Spirit to the Galatians and works powerful deeds among them “from” the Galatians’ own “hearing of faith” (*ek akoēs pisteōs*).
- By using the Greek word *akoē*, Paul draws on his Jewish roots: “hearing” the word of the Lord means not only receiving the word, but also *heeding* that word and *responding* accordingly.
- According to 4:13-15, the Galatians *received* Paul as a messenger (“angel”) of God, as Christ Jesus himself, and they *heeded* Paul’s embodied word of the Lord by *responding faithfully* to Paul in a Christ-like manner (the Galatians would have “torn out their very eyes” to help him).

Translation of Gal 3:6-9

6 Just as Abraham “believed [*pisteuō*] God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness [*dikaiosynē*,” 7 so, you see, people of faith [*ek pisteōs*] are sons of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify [*dikaioō*] the Gentiles on the grounds of faith [*ek pisteōs*], gossiped beforehand [*proeuangelizomai*] to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” 9 So, it is those who are blessed on the grounds of faith [*ek pisteōs*] who are blessed together with the faithful [*pistos*] Abraham.

Commentary on Gal 3:6-9

Paul interprets the story of Abraham in scripture to *oppose* circumcision. The Jewish-Christian teachers have probably used the story of Abraham in Genesis to argue that entering God's covenant requires circumcision, since the very sign of God's covenant with Abraham was circumcision (see Gen 17:1-14).

Paul offers his own *creative* and *audacious* interpretation of the story of Abraham in Genesis to *counter* their arguments. Based on his reading of Genesis, Paul concludes that all those who live their lives on the ground of faith (*ek pisteōs*) are blessed, together with the "faithful" (*pistos*) Abraham (Gal 3:9), as all are brought into "right relationship" with God. Thus, Paul daringly concludes that the Gentiles are the *real* "sons of Abraham" because they live their lives on the basis of faith rather than observance of the Jewish Law.

What does it mean to live on the basis of faith (*ek pisteōs*)?

Remember, the word *pistis* includes both elements of "faith" ("trust," or "confidence") *and* "faithfulness." To live on the basis of faith is to live "faithfully," as Abraham did.

What, then, does it mean to live "faithfully"?

Remember, also, Gal 2:20, where Paul says: "the life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Living "faithfully" is living Christ's life of self-giving love for others.

Scripture anticipated Paul's "gospel" of inclusion to *all* the faithful. In Gen 12:3 and 18:18 God promised that "all the nations" (Gentiles) will be blessed in Abraham. Thus, argues Paul, scripture "gospelled beforehand" to Abraham, announcing the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in the blessing of a right relationship with God on the basis of faith rather than observance of the Jewish Law.

Translation of Gal 3:10-12

10 For as many as ground their lives on works of the law [*ek ergōn nomou*] are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the Law by doing them." 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified [*dikaioō*] before God by the Law; for "The righteous one [*dikaios*] will live from faith [*ek pisteōs*]." 12 But the Law is not grounded on faith [*ek pisteōs*]; on the contrary, "The one doing these things will live by them."

Commentary on Gal 3:10-12

As is often the case with Paul's letters, his original readers had an advantage over us. They knew what Paul taught them when he was with them at earlier points in time. We sometimes have to try to reconstruct what Paul might have taught the Galatians if we hope to understand what he is arguing to them now in this letter. Here, in this section of the letter, Paul makes another dense argument from scripture and the experience of daily life. To facilitate our study, we will simply summarize the logic and conclusions of Paul's extended argument.

For those who choose to live by the Law, it also comes with a curse.

According to Paul, those who undergo circumcision promise to do *everything* the Law requires, quoting Deut 27:26. Paul points out a major disadvantage of life under the Law: it invokes a curse on those who do not obey *all* its commandments.

In Paul's view, it is clear that no one is put into right relationship by following the Law. Paul hearkens back to the evidence of his experience at Antioch: by following the Law, Jews and Gentiles were not "justified" with God or one another.

There are two different experiences of "life" on offer. Paul sets two different scriptural approaches to life in opposition.

- In v. 11, he quotes Hab 2:4 (see also Rom 1:17): the person in right relationship with God and neighbor (*dikaïos*, the "righteous" or "just" one) will live from faith (*ek pisteōs*).
- In v. 12, Paul quotes Lev 18:5: the person doing the things required by the Law will experience the life of the Law (which, of course, includes the possibility of a curse for disobedience).

Translation of Gal 3:13-14

13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" – 14 in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through the faith [*dia tēs pisteōs*].

Commentary on Gal 3:13-14

Christ's death by crucifixion on a tree put him under the Law's "curse." Paul quotes Deut 21:23, a passage which was already being used by many first century Jews to *refute* the claim that Jesus is Messiah.

Paul boldly turns this Jewish argument to his advantage: Christ's death as a "curse" under the Law redeemed others from that same "curse." Paul does not directly explain the logic of his argument. But his reasoning seems to go like this: by raising Christ from the dead (1:1), God proclaims a

resounding “no!” to the Law’s “curse” on the faithful Christ, the one who gave himself for others (1:4; 2:20).

According to Paul, Christ’s redemptive death accomplished two purposes. First, the “blessing of Abraham” (that his trust in God was reckoned to him as “righteousness” or “justification” with God) now extends to *all* people, even Gentiles (Gal 3:6). Second, everyone may now receive the “promise of the Spirit through the faith.” At this point, what do you think the “promise of the Spirit through the faith” might be?

Translation of Gal 3:15-22

15 Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's last will and testament [*diathēkē*] has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. 16 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. 17 My point is this: the Law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant [*diathēkē*] previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. 18 For if the inheritance comes from the Law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God graced [*charizomai*] Abraham through the promise.

19 Why then the Law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. 20 Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.

21 Is the Law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a Law had been given that was powerful enough to create life, then justice [*dikaiosynē*] would indeed come through the Law. 22 But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of Sin, so that the promise from the faith of Jesus Christ [*ek pisteōs Iēsou Christou*] might be given to all the ones believing [*pisteuō*].

Commentary on Gal 3:15-22

In this passage, Paul deals with the question of *why* God would grant the Torah at all, if the simple, open-ended faithfulness of Abraham was a sufficient pattern for human salvation. Paul uses an elaborate analogy involving a last will and testament. In the passages that follow, he builds on the argument to include references to the heirs and sons of the father who made the last will and testament in this analogy.

For those of us who have *never* lived by obedience to Torah, it is perhaps more important to attend to how Paul describes what is promised “from the faith of Jesus Christ.”

Paul uses a word play and an analogy from daily life to make his point.

The Greek word *diathēkē* can refer to person’s last will and testament and it can also refer to a covenant, such as the one God establishes with Abraham and, later, with God’s people through Moses.

- God ratified the original promise to Abraham when God “graced” him, presumably with an “offspring.”
- The verb “graced” (*charizomai*) is rooted in *charis*, the life-giving power of God, thus indicating that God gave what was promised to Abraham through an exercise of God’s life-giving power.
- Once that promise was ratified with an “offspring,” the Law and the covenant [*diathēkē*] that came 430 years later cannot change the terms and conditions of God’s original promise to Abraham.

Once again, Paul daringly interprets Genesis. Paul also observes in Genesis that the recipients of God’s promises are Abraham and his *singular* “offspring.”

- Throughout the centuries of Israel’s interpretation of Genesis, the “offspring” of Abraham was traditionally understood as a *collective* noun, referring to Israel, chief among Abraham’s many descendants.

- Paul offers a radically different interpretation, however, arguing that God made promises *only* to Abraham and Christ, Abraham's only "offspring."
- At this point, along with other Jews and Jewish-Christians, we might ask Paul: "but what about Ishmael and Isaac, weren't they Abraham's original "offspring"?"
- We see in Paul's argument, a style of rabbinic biblical interpretation that would have been much more tolerable to first century Jews than modern day Christians.
- Nevertheless, the offensiveness of Paul's argument is undeniable: he claims that being Abraham's "offspring" depends on faith, and Jesus Christ is his *only* "offspring."

Essentially, in the argument, Paul denies the faith of Israel. He erases all of Abraham's line of heirs between him and Christ, making Christ the *only* heir of Abraham through faith.

How do you think the other Jewish-Christians responded to Paul's outrageous biblical interpretation?

Just as audaciously, Paul says the Law is only God's *temporary* plan! Paul answers the obvious question that every good Jew will ask Paul after hearing his unconventional interpretation of the story of Abraham in Genesis: "why, then, did God give us the Law?" Paul answers by making the Law a stopgap measure to constrain transgressions until the arrival of Abraham's faithful "offspring."

So, then, doesn't the Law work against the promises of God? "Certainly not!" says Paul in 3:21. The Law does not have the power to "create life," a power that Paul implies is the real basis of "justice" or "righteousness" (*dikaïosynē*) in the world. Paul thus hints that "justice" or "righteousness"

comes not through the Law, but when God honors promises by means of God's power to create life.

- Back in 2:21, Paul also intimated that "justice" or "righteousness" (*dikaioynē*) does not come through the Law, but through the death of Christ and the life-giving power of God (*charis*, "grace").
- Paul seems to affirm this in 3:18: God honored the promise to Abraham when God "graced" (*charizomai*) Abraham (presumably with an "offspring"), an exercise of God's life-giving power Paul calls *charis* ("grace").
- Now, in 3:21, Paul once again suggests the Law doesn't accomplish "justice" or "righteousness."
- Instead, in 3:22, Paul makes an opaque statement that scripture imprisoned all things under the power of sin; what he means is far from obvious, though Paul says scripture used sin for a purpose.

The purpose was to give what was promised to Christ to everyone who has faith. Once again, Paul's argument is far from clear. But he seems to be saying that what was promised to Christ (Abraham's only "offspring" according to 3:16) is also now available to all people who "believe" – that is, to all those who have "the faith of Jesus Christ."

Translation of Gal 3:23-29

23 Now before the faith [*tēn pistin*] came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the Law until the faith [*tēn pistin*] destined to be revealed. 24 Therefore the Law was our moral tutor [*paidagōgos*] until Christ came, so that we might be justified [*dikaioō*] from faithfulness [*ek pisteōs*]. 25 But now that the faith [*tēs pisteōs*] has come, we are no longer subject to a moral tutor [*paidagōgos*], 26 for you are all sons of God through the faith in Christ Jesus [*dia tēs pisteōs en Iēsou Christou*]. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 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. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Commentary on Gal 3:23-29

The Law was a moral tutor until “the faith” was finally revealed.

Paul continues to explain the temporary function of the Jewish Law.

- Paul characterizes the Law as a *paidagōgos* (from which we get words such as “pedagogy”), a first century moral tutor who was an educated slave in the household, teaching and mentoring the male children until they reached the age of maturity.
- As with the Jewish Law, the *paidagōgos* would severely restrict the freedom of the child in order *to protect the child* (Paul uses the verbs (“guard” and “imprison” to make this point about the Law in v. 23).
- The *paidagōgos* served until the father determined his son had reached the age of maturity and no longer needed specific moral instruction.

Paul equates the arrival of Christ with the arrival of “the faith,” so that everyone may be put into right relationship “from faith” (*ek pisteōs*).

- Paul suggests that with the coming of Christ and “the faith” (of Christ), humanity no longer needs specific moral instruction from the Law that was serving as the moral tutor (*paidagōgos*).
- When Jews and Gentiles live “from faith” – the newly revealed norm for behavior – *all* people are “justified” with God and one another.

Everyone living by this new standard of “faith” becomes a “son of God.”

- In the first century world, a “son” was expected to join in the father’s business and continue to carry it out on behalf of the father.
- In the world of first century *Judaism*, a “son of God” was a person who lived in such a way that *God’s* will was done fully through that person.
- When a person lives faithfully, she or he serves as a kind of channel for the power of God to enliven the world.

- Paul draws on both these images, encouraging the churches in Galatia to become “sons of God” by living the new pattern of Christ’s faithfulness and thereby carrying out their Father’s will in the world.

We “clothe ourselves with Christ,” by “putting on” Christ in daily life.

- In baptism, believers wholeheartedly commit to wear Jesus Christ like a garment – living the life of Jesus (“the faith of Jesus Christ”) as if they were actors, playing the part of Christ on the stage of life, in every place they live and work.
- Paul would expect us, as followers of Christ, to use our imaginations to envision and embody Christ’s faithfulness in our own daily lives.
- By living this way, Paul would expect each of us to be able to say, with him, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (see Gal 2:20).

When clothed with Christ, we disregard competing moral standards.

- In Paul’s world (as in ours) there were many different behavioral standards (including the Jewish Law) that created boundary-setting human distinctions, telling people how they were to live and interact with each other (if at all!) in various interpersonal settings.
- According to Paul, all these human distinctions (such as Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female) disappear when people live by the new standard Paul calls “the faith of Jesus Christ,” as all people are brought into right relationship with one another.
- Today, we still have many boundary-setting human distinctions that impact the way we act towards one another (for example: rich/poor, employed/unemployed, Republican/Democrat, conservative/liberal, straight/gay, citizen/illegal alien, etc.).
- What are some concrete ways our behavior might change if we took seriously Paul’s claim that faithful, Christ-like living means we must disregard these categories that divide us and keep us from right relationships with one another?

Translation of Gal 4:1-7

Galatians 4:1 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; 2 but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. 3 So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. 4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 in order to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then also an heir, through God.

Commentary on Gal 4:1-7

God sent a human "son" so all people could be adopted as God's "sons."

- Paul continues to draw on the metaphor of the *paidagōgos*, noting that at a child's maturity the *paidagōgos* is no longer needed.
- Paul emphasizes that, according to God's timetable, God sent a human son (born of a woman, under the Law) to declare the time of human maturity.
- This maturity means being liberated from the constraints of the Law, with the possibility that all humans can be adopted as God's sons.

The Galatians' experience of the Spirit confirms their adoption as "sons."

Paul ends this section of the letter as it began: reminding the Galatians of their first experience of the Spirit and power of God (see Gal 3:1-5).

- That first experience of the Spirit, says Paul, was proof of their adoption as God's sons without regard to any observance of the Law!
- In fact, says Paul, *because* the Galatians heeded and responded to Paul's proclamation of Christ crucified through their own Christ-like "hearing of faith" (Gal 3:1-5), God sent the Spirit of God's son into their hearts, moving them to proclaim God as Father.

Translation of Gal 4:8-11

Galatians 4:8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. 9 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? 10 You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. 11 I am afraid that I may have labored in vain!

Commentary on Gal 4:8-11

The Galatians are now turning their backs on being God’s adopted sons.

- Paul is incredulous that, having known God through faith and their experiences of the Spirit and God’s life-giving power, the Galatians are now turning to the Jewish Law, with its calendar of holy days and observances.
- As people once enslaved to pagan, worldly gods and ways of living, Paul contends they are returning to that way of life by following the Jewish Law.
- The argument will continue in 4:12-20 (Study Session 5) that follows.

Questions for Reflection

1. We have suggested that Paul characterized his “physical infirmity” as a living illustration of the embodiment of Christ crucified. Have you ever seen a similar, living illustration of “Christ crucified” before your own eyes? Describe the event. What impact did that experience have on you?

2. The crucial turning point in the lives of the Galatians consisted of an experience of the Spirit and a demonstration of the power of God in their lives together. Have there been similar turning points for you in your life, when you experienced the Spirit or the power of God? Did anyone try to persuade you that your experience was not a valid encounter with the Spirit or power of God?
3. Do you trust your own religious experience? If so, why? If not, why not? What is the relationship between a community of faith and one's individual religious experiences?
4. Paul's biblical interpretation in Galatians no doubt surprised and even angered his fellow Jews and Jewish-Christians. Some of them may have characterized his interpretations as new and radical, non-traditional, idiosyncratic, or even groundless. How should the church today respond to new interpretations of scripture? How are interpretations of scripture tested?
5. Paul argues that "the faith of Jesus Christ" has been revealed as the new standard for human action, a standard whose purpose is to bring all people into right relationship with each other. Applying the standard requires us to use our imaginations to try to envision specific conduct in our own lives that will embody "the faith of Jesus Christ." How do you feel about the freedom this gives each of us to respond? Would you prefer to live your life by specific rules? Why, or why not?
6. Does the image of "clothing yourself with Christ" stimulate your imagination about how you might embody Christ in your own life?
7. Paul's world divided people into different categories such as Jew or Greek; slave or free; male and female. These categories determined how people were to act toward others. Describe the various ways we categorize people today. What moral norms and customs follow from

such categorizations? What changes might we need to make to live into Paul's view that "in Christ" such categories no longer exist?

8. According to the story of Abraham in Genesis, the original reason for God's promise was that Abraham would become a blessing to *all* people. Given that understanding, it appears that Paul's issue with the Law is not that any particular part of it is bad or not a good way to live. Rather, as he comes to understand it, the problem is that following some parts of the Law can lead to division and the creation of barriers that separate people rather than putting them in right relationship with each other. From Paul's perspective, this is not the "blessing" for all people that God had in mind when God made the promise to Abraham. Have you or anyone else used Christian faith to create a barrier with others that turned out not to be life-giving? What boundaries do you think are appropriate, given God's vision of one world where all people are in right relationship with one another?