Tracing Paul’s Argument in Galatians 3:1–26

**Part One:** Paul substantiates the claim that righteousness comes through “faith in Christ” or “the faith[fullness] of Christ,” and not through works of Torah. (Gal 3:1–18)

I. AN ARGUMENT FROM THE ACTIVITY OF THE SPIRIT (Gal 3:1–5)
A. The Spirit comes from God and is solid evidence of the Galatians’ justification
   1. See Gal 4:6; Rom 8:9–11
   2. Paul sees the Spirit as the defining aspect of Christian existence (see Rom 8:1–27)
B. The Galatians received the Spirit not “from the works of the law,” but from “believing what you heard.” By this phrase (taken from the NRSV), Paul could be saying:
   1. You received the Spirit by hearing with belief (same as NRSV).
   2. You received the Spirit by hearing “the faith” (that is, “the gospel”).
   3. You received the Spirit from the message that enables or creates belief.
   4. You received the Spirit from the message of “the faith” (that is, “the gospel”)

II. TWO ARGUMENTS FROM SCRIPTURE (Gal 3:6–14)
A. An argument from Abraham (Gal 3:6–9)
   1. The argument’s core: Abraham’s righteousness came about through his faith in God (Gen 15:6; see also Rom 4:1–12). Therefore, true descendants of Abraham are not those who observe torah or submit to circumcision, but those who are likewise people of faith.
   2. Paul contrasts two types of people, who inhabit two different religious economies:
      - “Those who believe” (Faith-People)
      - “Those who rely on the works of the law” (Works-of-Torah-People)
   - These two different systems or economies lead to two totally different outcomes
B. An argument from scripture to see if “works of torah” can accomplish justification (3:10–14)
   1. Paul’s argument proceeds according to his own statements. That is, Paul’s own claims drive what he says. The biblical texts do not advance the force of the argument as much as they offer links or transitions between Paul’s ideas.
   2. See the schematic layout of Galatians 3:10–14 on the final page of this handout.
   3. Paul’s conclusions stem from his certainty (1) that the Spirit has been given to gentiles, showing them to be heirs of God’s promise to Abraham, blessing the gentiles, and (2) that Christ died the death of a cursed man, taking on the law’s sentence.

III. AN ARGUMENT FROM HUMAN PRACTICE (Gal 3:15–18)
A. Paul argues that a human will is binding and cannot be changed by another. The same is true with God’s covenant [same word as “will”] with Abraham. Once God established that covenant, the law (which came 430 years later, under Moses) could not add to or annul the prior covenant.
B. What is the point of this covenant to Abraham?
   1. Paul says it was valid only for Abraham and his (singular) “seed” (that is, Christ).
   2. Therefore, others benefit from the promise only through Abraham or Christ.
   3. Abraham has no connection to the law. Christ took on the law’s curse for us.
Part Two: Paul explains the purpose of the law. (Gal 3:19–26)

I. INTRODUCTION
A. Paul often speaks of both justification through “faith in Christ” (or through “the faith[fulness] of Christ”) and the role/purpose/status of the law in the same contexts.
B. The law is not necessarily a dominant theme in the whole of Paul’s thought. He speaks of it in Galatians, in Romans, in isolated portions of 1 Corinthians, and in Philippians 3.
C. The law and any problems that it creates or reveals are not the starting point of Paul’s theology. He speaks about the law in various ways in various contexts. For example:
   1. The law does not bring God’s righteousness (Rom 3:20-22; Phil 3:8-9).
   2. To be under the law is to be under sin’s dominion (Rom 6:14; cf. 1 Cor 15:56).
   3. The law holds us captive and arouses sinful passions (Rom 7:5-6).
   4. Through the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20).
   6. The law is holy (Rom 7:12).
   7. We uphold the law (Rom 3:31).
   8. Believers fulfill the law (or, it is fulfilled in us) (Gal 5:14; Rom 8:4; Rom 13:8-10).

II. WHY DOES THE LAW MATTER TO PAUL?
A. The structure of the Letter to the Galatians reflects Paul’s approach to the problem
   1. The gospel of Christ belongs also to the gentiles (Gal 1).
   2. Righteousness comes through Christ’s faith[fulness] (or “faith in Christ”) (Gal 2).
   3. Faith and works of the law represent separate, incompatible systems (Gal 3).
B. Why, then, was the law given? What does it do?
C. See that this question is, for Paul, fundamentally a theological (not psychological) problem
   1. The question is not prompted by his personal struggle or sense of guilt
   2. The question is more than theological curiosity; it reflects a radical shift in Paul’s understanding of torah

III. HOW, ACCORDING TO PAUL, IS THE LAW DEFECTIVE OR INEFFECTUAL? INTERPRETATIONS OF THIS HAVE GENERALLY FOLLOWED TWO MAIN CURRENTS:
A. One possibility: The law requires human effort to achieve or maintain salvation (compare Rom 10:3–4), creating a situation in which human sinfulness is brought to light and even intensified (Rom 5:20; 7:4–14).
   1. A strength of this position: This points out a theological core of Paul’s thought, contrasting God’s actions for justification with our own efforts toward our justification.
   2. Weaknesses of this position:
      a. Often expressed according to only a forensic (legal) understanding of righteousness/justification
      b. Often stresses (wrongly) that torah was really about promoting human self-sufficiency or earning God’s favor
      c. Because of (b), it appears that this misrepresents first-century Judaism
      d. Why would God institute something that encourages or enables sin?
      e. May suggest that God has been tricked by sin’s “manipulation” of law
B. Another possibility: There is nothing inherently “wrong” with the law, except that it does not work “through Christ” and it does not allow gentiles access to righteousness. The righteousness that comes through Christ replaces anything that the law might promise to provide (Phil 3:8–9).

1. A strength of this position: This reflects a more accurate understanding of first-century Judaism.

2. Weaknesses of this position:
   a. It often leaves Paul self-contradictory
   b. It leaves unresolved why God instituted the law in the first place

C. These two currents of interpretation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some interpreters try to relate aspects of both of them. Together, these perspectives could reflect Paul’s commitment to his Jewish identity and his conviction that the gospel has inaugurated a totally new way of living under God and with others.

IV. Why, then, the law? According to Gal 3:19–26…

A. “Because of transgressions” (v. 19)
   1. This could mean “to restrain transgressions” (see Lull essay recommended for today)
   2. Or, it could mean “to produce/provoke/condemn transgressions.”

B. “The law was our pedagogue” (vv. 24–25)
   1. A disciplinarian or “pedagogue” was a slave that taught and guarded children; primarily a moral guide who accompanied a child everywhere until the child reached a certain age of maturity (see Lull on the roles of pedagogues in antiquity)
   2. This could mean that the law performed a protective, restraining role for a given time (this is Lull’s view of the pedagogue metaphor)
      a. Not a matter of training in preparation for Christ
      b. Note that the NIV flattens the role of the pedagogue and misses the temporal role of a pedagogue. The TNIV corrects this.
   3. Or, it could mean that the law served as an agent or a captive of sin, functioning to enslave humanity. (The context of Paul’s wider argument is the best evidence for this interpretation, which would see Lull’s perspective as too reliant on the characteristics of pedagogues in other ancient writings.)
      a. The repetition of the verb “imprison,” in vv. 22 and 23, suggests an insidious function of the law as pedagogue.
         - The Greek prepositional expression for “under” (hypo plus the accusative case) appears in 3:10, 22, 23, 25; 4:2, 3, 4, 5, 21; 5:21
      c. In Gal 4:1, the interim period of awaiting maturity is called slavery

V. What shall we say, then? According to Gal 3:19–26…

A. The law’s function as a pedagogue is not a “positive” image. The function of the law is much more treacherous than merely a “schoolmaster” (KJV), a “tutor” (NASB), or a moral guide.

B. Paul appears to consider the law’s “pedagogical” function in light of the law’s close ties to sin. Somehow both sin and law work together in enslaving or imprisoning people.

C. This function of the law is a temporary one—prior to the advent of one’s faith through Christ.

D. The law is not opposed to the promises of God. Even if the law has been corrupted by sin, nevertheless God’s promises will work out. The law still has a role in God’s redemptive work.
**Paul’s Statements**

**Gal 3:10** For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse;

**Scriptural Links or Illustrations**

for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.”

**Gal 3:11** Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law;

for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

**Gal 3:12** But the law does not rest on faith; (literally: “the law is not from faith”)

on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.”

**Gal 3:13** 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” —

**Gal 3:14** 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 faith.

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1 Probably a conflation of Deut 27:26 and Deut 28:58
2 Hab 2:4
3 Lev 18:5
4 From Deut 21:23
Some of Paul’s Statements about *Torah* (“the Law”)

*Taken from the NRSV*

Rom 3:20–22: For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Rom 3:31: Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Rom 5:20: But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied;

Rom 6:14: For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Rom 7:4–14: You have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.

Rom 8:3–4: For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Rom 10:3–4: For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.
Rom 13:8–10: Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

1 Cor 15:56: The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

Gal 3:19–26: Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring [literally, “the seed” (singular)] would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. Now a mediator involves more than one party: but God is one. Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through [or “from”] the law. But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin [literally: “under sin”], so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe [or, as the NET puts it: “that the promise could be given—because of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ—to those who believe”]. Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.

Gal 3:23–24: Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Gal 3:23–24: Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was put in charge of us until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

Gal 5:14: For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Phil 3:8–9: I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.