

Galatians Chapter 3

A Deep Expository Study: The Spirit Received, the Law Exposed, and the Sons of Abraham Revealed

Introduction to Galatians Chapter 3

Faith Against Works, Promise Against Law, and the Inheritance That Belongs to All Who Are in Christ

Galatians chapter 3 is the theological summit of the entire letter. Everything Paul has argued in chapters 1 and 2 -- the divine origin of his gospel, the curse on any alternative, the confrontation with Peter, the declaration that he has been crucified with Christ -- all of it has been building toward this chapter. Here, Paul makes his case not only from personal testimony and apostolic authority but from Scripture itself. He calls the Galatians back to Abraham. He calls them back to the promise. He calls them back to the cross. And he calls them forward into the astonishing declaration that in Christ Jesus, every wall that human beings have ever used to divide one another has been demolished.

This chapter is dense, fast-moving, and relentlessly logical. Paul moves from pastoral rebuke to historical argument to legal analogy to cosmic declaration, all in service of a single thesis: the inheritance of God's blessing comes through faith, not through the law, because it was promised through faith before the law ever existed. The law cannot cancel a promise. The law cannot produce the Spirit. Only faith in Jesus Christ can do any of these things.

The Setting Behind the Chapter

To understand chapter 3, we must remember what the Judaizers were claiming and why it was appealing. Their argument was not irrational on its surface: Abraham was circumcised, the covenant God made with Israel was formalized through the Mosaic law, and if you Gentiles want to be fully part of this covenant community, you must enter through the same door. Paul's counterargument is breathtaking in its precision. He grants the Judaizers their own premise -- Abraham -- and then shows that the premise destroys their conclusion. Abraham was not justified by circumcision or law-keeping. He was justified by faith, centuries before the law was given and decades before he was circumcised.

The Four Major Movements of the Chapter

Chapter 3 moves through four powerful and distinct arguments. First, Paul confronts the Galatians directly with the evidence of their own Spirit-filled experience. Second, he

makes the case from Abraham that justification by faith is the original and permanent structure of God's dealings with humanity. Third, he explains the role of the law in redemptive history, arguing that it was never designed to give life or produce the inheritance. Fourth, he delivers the chapter's climactic declaration: that in Christ Jesus, the old human divisions of ethnicity, social status, and gender no longer determine standing before God.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we open Galatians chapter 3, we come to You aware that we are entering territory that requires both careful minds and humble hearts. This chapter will ask us to think -- to follow an argument about promise and law and inheritance that requires close attention. But it will also ask us to feel the rebuke Paul delivers to the Galatians, because it is a rebuke that belongs to every generation that drifts from the simplicity of faith back toward the exhausting project of self-justification.

Lord, show us the folly of beginning in the Spirit and then turning to the flesh. Show us the sufficiency of what You gave us when You gave us Christ -- not as a starting point to be built upon, but as the full and final ground of our acceptance before You. Let us see Abraham not as an ancient figure in a history lesson, but as the father of a family we belong to -- not by bloodline or ritual observance, but by the same faith that was credited to him as righteousness. We come as people who need to be reminded: the promise is ours -- not because we have earned it, but because we belong to the Seed to whom it was given. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Galatians 3:1-5 -- The Folly of Abandoning What You Have Already Received

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? Have you experienced so much in vain -- if it really was in vain? So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

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Listen, you Galatians -- have you completely lost your minds? Somebody has messed with your heads. When I was with you, I preached Jesus Christ crucified so clearly it was like you were standing right there at the cross watching it happen. Now I have just one question for you: When the Holy Spirit showed up in your life, was it because you were keeping the Jewish law? Or was it because you heard the gospel and believed it? Think about that. You started this whole journey in the power of God's Spirit -- and now you think you are going to cross the finish line through your own religious effort? That makes absolutely no sense.

Did you go through all of that for nothing? Let me ask it one more time: when God pours out His Spirit among you and works miracles in your midst, is He doing that because of your law-keeping, or because you heard the gospel and believed it?

The Context

Paul opens chapter 3 without transition, without softening, and without any diplomatic cushioning. He calls them foolish -- the Greek word is *anoetoi*, meaning without understanding, senseless, people who have stopped thinking clearly. This is not casual name-calling. It is a pastoral diagnosis. The accusation of bewitchment describes a state in which a person could no longer see reality clearly. Someone has cast a spell of theological confusion over them, and the spell looks like this: what Christ accomplished on the cross is not enough. You need to add something. You need to complete it.

The Crucifixion as a Public Proclamation

The word translated "clearly portrayed" (*prographo*) means to write or display publicly, as a notice posted in a public square. Paul's proclamation of the crucified Christ had been so vivid and so central that it was as if the Galatians had watched the crucifixion happen in front of them. The cross was not a footnote in Paul's preaching. It was the entire message. And now they are deserting it. They are adding to what was displayed as complete.

The Argument from Their Own Experience

Paul asks a single question and presses it twice: did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by believing what you heard? The answer was obvious. They were Gentiles. They had not observed the Mosaic law before coming to faith. And yet the Spirit had come. The miracles had happened. The transformation had been real. Beginning in the Spirit and completing in the flesh is not a logical progression. It is a contradiction, a regression, a return to a lesser power than the one that has already worked mightily among them.

Key Observations

- **Paul's rebuke is urgent and direct** because a community that has seen the cross clearly is turning away from it.
- **The portrayal of Christ crucified was the center and substance of Paul's preaching**, not a background assumption.
- **The Galatians' reception of the Spirit through faith** is itself the most immediate argument against the Judaizer position.
- **Beginning in the Spirit and completing in the flesh** is not a progression but a contradiction.
- **God does not distribute His Spirit on the basis of legal performance.** The ongoing activity of God among the Galatians proved this beyond dispute.

Galatians 3:6-14 -- Abraham, the Curse, and the Blessing That Comes Through Christ

So also Abraham 'believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because 'the righteous will live by faith.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

Here is the thing about Abraham -- the Bible says he simply believed God, and God counted that as righteousness. So get this straight: the people who truly belong to Abraham's family are not the people with the right bloodline or the right religious rituals. They are the people who have faith, just like Abraham did. And God knew this was coming all along -- way back in Genesis He told Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. That was the gospel being announced in advance. So everyone who lives by faith gets in on the same blessing Abraham received. But everyone who is trying to earn God's approval through law-keeping is actually under a curse, because the law demands that you keep every single rule perfectly, all the time, without exception -- and nobody does that. Christ stepped in and took that curse on Himself. He was hung on a cross, which under the law meant He was cursed, so that the blessing God promised to Abraham could reach the Gentiles through Him, and so that everyone who believes could receive the promised Holy Spirit.

The Context

Paul now moves from the Galatians' experience to the Old Testament itself, going to the founding figure that the Judaizers themselves would have claimed: Abraham. Genesis 15:6 is Paul's anchor text: Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." The word "credited" is an accounting term. God credited righteousness to Abraham's account on the basis of faith. The transaction was entirely initiated and completed by divine grace, received by faith, with no human merit serving as the currency of exchange.

Who Are the Children of Abraham?

The Judaizers' answer was ethnic and ritual: the children of Abraham are those who are circumcised and keep the law. Paul's answer is theological and spiritual: those who have faith are children of Abraham. The announcement to Abraham that "all nations will be blessed through you" was not an ethnic prediction about the spread of Jewish culture. It was a gospel announcement -- the advance proclamation that the blessing of justification by faith would overflow the boundaries of one nation and reach every people on earth.

Christ Became a Curse for Us

The resolution to the curse of the law is the most stunning statement in this section. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. The curse that belonged to every law-breaker was transferred to Christ at the cross. He absorbed the full judicial consequence of humanity's failure to meet the law's demands, so that those who were under the curse could be freed from it. The one who had no curse became cursed for those who deserved nothing else, so that those who deserved nothing else could receive the blessing that belonged to Abraham.

Key Observations

- **Abraham's justification by faith precedes both circumcision and the Mosaic law**, establishing faith as the original and permanent structure of God's covenant with humanity.
- **The children of Abraham are defined by faith, not ethnicity** -- a truth the Old Testament itself announces.
- **The law's demand for perfect, continuous obedience** places everyone who relies on it under a curse, because no one meets that standard.
- **Christ's redemption from the curse was substitutionary** -- He became what we were under, so that we could receive what He deserved.
- **The goal of redemption** was that the Abrahamic blessing would reach the Gentiles and that all who believe would receive the promised Spirit.

Galatians 3:15-22 -- The Priority of the Promise Over the Law

Brothers and sisters, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to

whom the promise referred had come. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

Let me give you a real-world example. When a person's will or legal contract has been officially drawn up and signed, nobody can just come along later and change the terms or cancel it. Same principle applies here. God made promises to Abraham and to his descendant -- and that word descendant is singular, pointing to one specific person, who is Christ. Here is the point: the law came 430 years after that promise was made. It cannot cancel the promise. It cannot rewrite the terms of a deal God already sealed. If the inheritance depended on law-keeping, it would no longer be a promise -- but God gave it to Abraham as a free promise, plain and simple. So why did God give the law at all? It was added to the story to make sin visible, to show people just how far short they fall, and it was only meant to serve that purpose until the promised descendant -- Christ -- arrived. The law was never designed to give life or produce righteousness on its own. Instead, the whole witness of Scripture has placed the entire human race under the verdict of sin -- not as a final punishment, but to make sure that the gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ would be given freely to everyone who believes.

The Context

Paul has established that justification is by faith, that those who rely on the law are under a curse, and that Christ has redeemed us from that curse. Now he addresses what might seem like an obvious objection: if the promise to Abraham was always about faith, why did God give the law at all? He draws on an analogy from everyday legal practice: once a covenant has been formally established, it cannot be unilaterally altered or annulled by a later party. The covenant God made with Abraham was established before the law existed -- and the law, arriving four centuries later, cannot retroactively redefine the terms of a prior covenant.

Why the Law Was Given

The law "was added because of transgressions." The Greek word for "added" (prostithemi) indicates something supplementary -- placed alongside something else that was already there. The law was not a replacement for the promise. It was added to serve a specific function: to make sin visible, to define it clearly, to reveal its true character as transgression against the holy standard of God. The law named it. The law quantified it. The law made sin exceedingly sinful (Romans 7:13). And in doing so, it drove the sinner toward the necessity of a rescue from outside themselves -- a rescue that the law itself could not provide.

Scripture Locked Everything Under Sin

Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin. The image is of a prison whose purpose is not punishment for its own sake but preparation for release. The law locks sinners in so that there is nowhere else to turn. It strips away every alternative route to righteousness. It closes every door except one. And when every door is closed except the door of faith in Jesus Christ, then what was promised -- righteousness by faith, the Spirit, the inheritance -- can be given freely to all who believe. The law's greatest service to the gospel: it makes the gospel the only option.

Key Observations

- **A ratified covenant cannot be overridden by a later document** -- the law, arriving 430 years after the Abrahamic promise, cannot cancel that promise.
- **The singular "seed" reaches its fullest meaning in Christ**, through whom all who believe become heirs of the promise.
- **The inheritance comes through promise, not law** -- a promise, by definition, is a gift of grace rather than a reward of performance.
- **The law was added to make sin visible and defined**, serving a temporary and preparatory role until Christ came.
- **Scripture locking everything under sin** is a gracious narrowing -- removing every alternative to faith so that faith in Christ becomes the undeniable path to the promise.

Galatians 3:23-29 -- The Guardian, the Family, and the Inheritance

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 our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

IN SIMPLE AMERICAN ENGLISH

Before Christ arrived and the age of faith was fully unveiled, we were like people being held in custody under the supervision of the law -- locked up and waiting for what was coming. The law was like a strict household guardian assigned to keep us in check until Christ showed up and we could be justified by faith. But now that He has come, we are done with the guardian. Because here is the truth: if you are in Christ Jesus, you are a full child of God through faith -- every single

one of you. All of you who were baptized into Christ have been wrapped in Christ like a brand new set of clothes -- His identity is now yours. And here is what that means: it does not matter if you are Jewish or not, whether you are a slave or free, whether you are a man or a woman. None of those things determine your standing before God when you are in Christ. You are all one in Him. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's true descendants -- and that makes you heirs. The inheritance is yours. Not someday. Right now.

The Context

Paul has established the law's role as a temporary measure added to the permanent promise. Now he gives that temporary role its most memorable description: the law was a guardian -- the Greek word is *paidagogos* -- until Christ came. In the Greco-Roman world, the *paidagogos* was a household slave assigned to a child, responsible for maintaining discipline and ensuring safe passage. He was the child's custodian -- often strict, sometimes harsh, always temporary. When the child reached maturity, the *paidagogos*'s role ended. To return to the guardian's authority now that Christ has come is to refuse maturity -- to insist on living like a child under a disciplinarian when sonship and full inheritance are available.

"You Are All Children of God Through Faith"

The word "all" in verse 26 is doing enormous theological work. Not some. Not those who meet additional requirements. All who are in Christ Jesus are children of God through faith. The criterion for membership in God's family is faith in Christ alone. To be baptized into Christ is to be united with Him in His death and resurrection, to have one's identity wrapped up in His identity. When God looks at the believer, He sees Christ.

Neither Jew nor Greek, Slave nor Free, Male nor Female

Verse 28 is one of the most explosive verses in the New Testament. Paul names the three most fundamental divisions of the ancient world: ethnic identity, social status, and biological identity. These divisions organized every aspect of ancient life and determined who had access to power and whose voice carried weight. Paul declares that these divisions have no determining power when it comes to standing before God and inheritance of the promise. In Christ, the ground is level -- not because the differences do not exist but because the differences do not matter for the question of whose faith is credited as righteousness. Any time the church creates a hierarchy of acceptance based on categories the cross has rendered irrelevant, it is functionally contradicting verse 28.

"You Are Abraham's Seed and Heirs According to the Promise"

If you belong to Christ -- if faith has united you to the Seed -- then you are Abraham's seed. Not through biological descent. Not through ritual compliance. Not through law-keeping. But through belonging to the one in whom all of Abraham's promises find their yes and amen (2 Corinthians 1:20). And if you are Abraham's seed, you are heirs -- not candidates for the inheritance, not probationary members of the covenant family, but

heirs. The inheritance belongs to you because it belongs to Christ, and you belong to Christ.

Key Observations

- **The law served as a guardian in the childhood of redemptive history** -- temporary, disciplinary, and preparatory for the arrival of Christ.
 - **Now that Christ has come, the guardian's role is complete;** returning to law-keeping is regression into a prior era.
 - **All who are in Christ are children of God through faith** -- the criterion is faith alone, not ethnic, ritual, or moral qualification.
 - **Baptism into Christ is the public declaration of union with Him** -- the believer's identity is now wrapped in Christ's identity.
 - **The three great divisions of the ancient world** carry no determining weight when it comes to standing before God in Christ.
 - **Belonging to Christ makes you Abraham's seed and heir of the promise** -- the inheritance is already yours, covenantally and permanently.
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What This Means for Us Today

1. Your Experience of the Spirit Is an Argument Against Self-Justification

Every believer who has experienced the reality of God's Spirit -- not as a reward for religious performance but as an unearned gift that arrived through faith -- carries in their own life the most direct possible refutation of works-based religion. The Spirit came when you believed. Not when you deserved it. Not when your behavior was sufficiently improved. When you heard the gospel and trusted Christ, the Spirit came.

2. The Cross Is Not a Beginning That Needs a Human Completion

The Galatian error -- beginning in the Spirit and then attempting to complete in the flesh -- shows up in the guilt-driven Christian who believes God is perpetually disappointed with them. It shows up in the achiever who makes their spiritual disciplines the basis of their confidence before God. Paul's answer: you received everything you have through faith. You do not complete what Christ has finished. You inhabit what He has accomplished.

3. Abraham Is More Relevant Than We Think

God credited righteousness to a man who had nothing to offer but trust. The man was old. His wife was barren. The promise he was trusting was biologically impossible. And

God credited his trust as righteousness. That is the gospel in its most elemental form -- trust in the God who gives life to the dead (Romans 4:17). Every believer stands in exactly that position: we have nothing to offer but faith, and God credits it as righteousness.

4. The Law Has Done Its Work -- Let It

The law did exactly what it was designed to do when it made you feel the weight of your sin, the impossibility of your own righteousness, and the desperate need for rescue from outside yourself. The law was locking you up so that faith in Christ would become your only door. If you have gone through that door, then the guardian has been dismissed. You are not a child in the disciplinarian's custody. You are a son or daughter in the Father's house.

5. The Divisions We Maintain Are Often Divisions the Cross Has Already Demolished

Wherever the church creates a hierarchy of acceptance -- where certain people are treated as more fully belonging on the basis of categories that the cross has rendered irrelevant to standing before God -- it is engaged in a form of the Galatian error. It is saying, functionally, that something more than belonging to Christ determines your place in the family.

6. You Are Already an Heir -- Live Like It

If you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's seed, and you are an heir. Not a candidate. Not a probationer. An heir. The inheritance is yours -- the forgiveness of sins, the righteousness of Christ credited to your account, the indwelling Spirit, the promise of resurrection and eternal life. You do not need to earn it. You cannot improve it. The appropriate response is gratitude, freedom, and the joyful service that flows from a person who is not working for approval they do not yet have, but working from the love of One by whose approval they are already and permanently held.

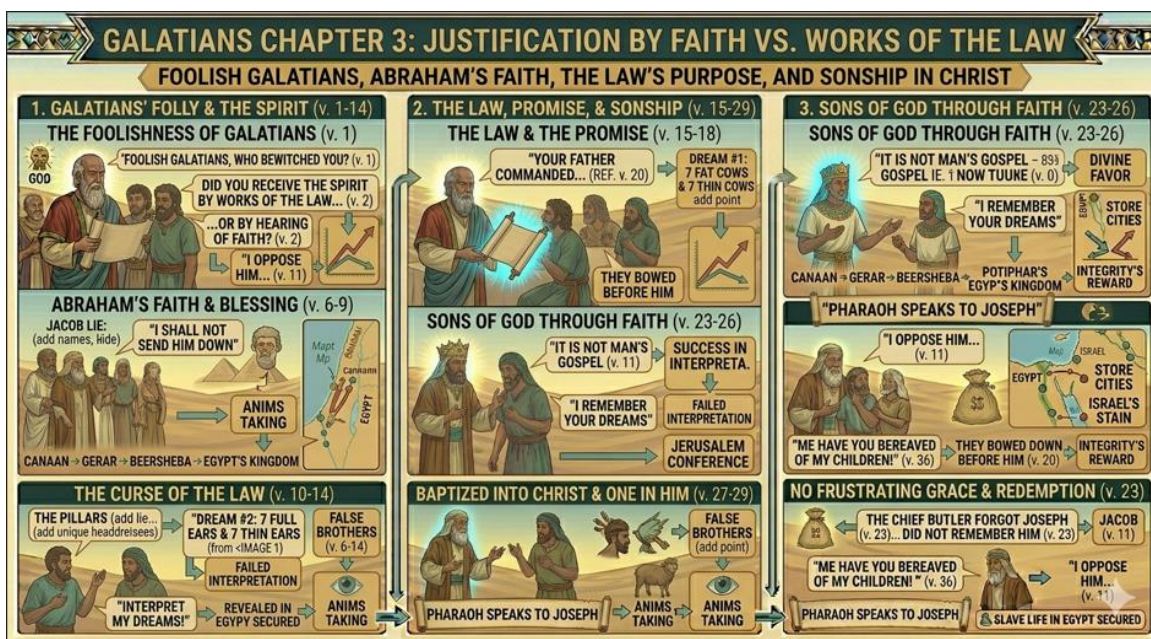
How This Relates to Today

Galatians 3 confronts the contemporary church at its most common and most subtle point of failure: the drift from grace back toward performance. Few churches or believers would openly affirm that Christ's work is insufficient. But the practical theology of many Christian communities tells a different story -- a story where people's sense of standing before God rises and falls with their behavior, where certain groups are more readily accepted than others based on criteria that have nothing to do with faith in Christ.

Paul's response is to take believers back -- to Abraham, to the promise, to the guardian, and finally to the cross. The cross is where the curse was absorbed. The cross is where the barrier between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female was demolished.

The cross is where every believer was united to the Seed, making them heirs of a promise that no law can revoke.

The church in every generation needs to hear what the Galatians needed to hear: you are not completing what Christ began. You are not supplementing a partial work. You are heirs. Now. Already. Because you belong to the One to whom the promise was made, and in Him, every promise of God is yes.



Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Galatians chapter 3, which has shown us again, with irresistible clarity, that the gospel of grace is not a preliminary stage to be improved upon but the final and sufficient word about how sinners are made right with You. We thank You that Abraham believed You and it was credited to him as righteousness -- and that we stand on exactly that ground. We thank You that Christ became a curse so that the curse that belonged to us would be absorbed and exhausted in Him, and that the blessing would flow freely to all who believe.

Lord, forgive us for every way we have tried to complete in the flesh what began in the Spirit. Remind us that the guardian has been dismissed. We are not children in custody. We are sons and daughters in the Father's house, and the inheritance belongs to us -- not because of what we have done but because of who we are in Christ.

And Father, let the declaration of verse 28 do its transforming work in us and in Your church. Where we have maintained walls that the cross tore down, convict us, correct us, and restore us to the unity that the gospel produces. Let us leave this chapter as people who know they are heirs -- not tentatively, not conditionally -- but truly and permanently and joyfully, because we belong to the Seed, and in the Seed, all the promises of God are ours. To You be glory -- Father, Son, and Spirit -- forever and ever. Amen.