

# Scripture and the Life of God

Session 3

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## Table Talk

What or whom do you consult for understanding biblical interpretation?

Why is it important to compare your beliefs to the commonly accepted beliefs held by the Christian community at large today and in the past?

How do the creeds inform our reading of Scripture?

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## Galatians: A Study in Interpretation

We now come to the meat of the letter

Galatians used by Martin Luther for *sola fide*

Justification by faith = salvation in many Christian circles.  
Faith is the means by which we go to heaven when we die

But is that what Paul is talking about here?

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# Galatians 2:1-14

The more recent story of what Paul has been up to

Continues to build toward the bigger event of the meeting in Antioch (even the early church had meetings!)

Visit to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus (Acts 11)

“14 years” - refers to visit to Jerusalem three years after his conversion. If Council occurred in 48AD, that would put Paul’s conversion at about 31AD, a year or so after Jesus’ resurrection

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## The Visit to Jerusalem

The “famine visit”

Went because of divine revelation

Laid before apostles the gospel he was proclaiming to the Gentiles to he was not “running in vain” (confirmation by community)

For Paul, the whole point is that God has acted to create a single new family. If Paul had been pulling the family apart, his work would have been in vain

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## The Visit to Jerusalem

Paul didn’t need official backing of Peter and James, but wanted to insure the doctrinal unity of the church

v. 4-6, Titus (a Gentile) not compelled to be circumcised, even after pressure from “false believers” - same thing false missionaries in Galatia were trying to do

Many saw Jerusalem as the center of the movement, but Paul sees Jesus as the center, not a geographical location

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## “Freedom and Truth” (2:4-5)

For Paul, God’s new age sets people free from the slavery of the old world of sin and death

It is an Exodus image; they are free to truly be God’s people

Truth - there is one Messiah, so no ethnic divisions in the church. That belongs to the old age.

Freedom and truth focused on the cross and resurrection of Jesus

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## Partnership (2:7-9)

Peter, James, and John saw what Paul was up to

A new fellowship and partnership - *koinonia* - sharing life in the Messiah together in the power of the Spirit

Division of mission, not message (Peter to Jews, Paul to Gentiles)

v. 9 - “we shook hands on it” - no additions to the gospel

v. 10 - remember the poor - signature of the early church, a sign of Jesus’ own mission

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## Problem (2:11-14)

Peter initially happy to connect with Gentiles (Acts 10)

But strict Jews challenged eating with Gentiles (they are outside the family)

Peter broke that taboo until “some people came from James” - caused Peter to withdraw from Gentiles (as well as others like Barnabas)

Paul points out the hypocrisy - confronts this distortion of the gospel

By withdrawing, Peter was in effect compelling Gentiles to be circumcised

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# Paul's Point to the Galatian Churches

“What I said to Peter then is the same thing that I say to you Galatians now...”

Embrace the gospel and live as the new covenant community!

This is the central truth of what he wants to say to the Galatians

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## Passage Questions

How does Paul's account of this dispute enhance his argument about the gospel?

What other kinds of Christian disputes does it bring to mind?

What is the proper way to handle doctrinal issues in the church?

How would you articulate Paul's "gospel?"

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## Galatians 2:15-21

Paul needs to explain what happened to the Jews first before he can explain how Jews and Gentiles have found a new identity

Three points:

The Law

Justification

The Death of Jesus

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# The Law (Torah)

Israel keeps commandments in order to be identified as God's people.

But Paul says that something has happened in Jesus that fulfilled the requirements of the law

- The law is not a moral system by which Jews make themselves good enough for God

For Paul, the law kept the Jews as a distinct people of God, but a Jesus a new identity takes place

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# Justification

A very specific focus - it's not about how people "get saved" (which is not a topic in Galatians at all)

Rather, the question is, "Who are God's covenant people?"

We don't have an English word to carry all the meanings that "justification" meant for Paul

There were multiple meanings in Paul's world: 1) the law court, 2) the covenant community

This is not merely a question about table manners, but about the definition of God's people

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# Justification

2:17 - what matters is being justified in the Messiah (as in Romans 3:24; Philippians 3:8-9)

It's about being declared as part of God's family

How do people get justified? Messiah's faithfulness - Jesus has been faithful to the purposes of God and, as a result, God's purposes have been fulfilled

The faith by which someone believes this joins up with the faithfulness of Jesus. Faith is the sign that one is part of the family

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# Galatians 2:15-16

Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners (outside the law)

But we know that a person is not declared righteous by works of the law, but through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah

That's why we, too, believed in the Messiah Jesus so that we might become part of God's family based on the Messiah's faithfulness (Psalm 143).

Scripture has already told you that trying to justify yourselves through the works of the law won't work

This is the truth of the gospel: believing Jews and Gentiles both belong in the family

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# Galatians 2:17-18

Eating with Gentiles: does that make me a sinner?

v. 18 - If, Peter, you erect again that partition between Jews and Gentiles you've gone back to the law, but the law itself condemns you

Either you will be a sinner or a lawbreaker

You are not a sinner if you eat with Gentiles, because God has fulfilled the law in Christ and redefined the family through faith

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# Galatians 2:19-20

Still part of the conversation with Peter

"Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God."

If you're in the sphere of the law and then you die, you come out from under the sphere of the law

Paul says, "I have been crucified with the Messiah" - he has died to the law and been given new life.

"Nevertheless I live" - it's not my life, it's the Messiah's life living in me

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## Galatians 2:19-20

The Messiah's death thus counts as my death - when God sees us, he sees the Messiah

The Messiah is in me, a hidden reality in my life

I am no longer defined by Torah, but defined by the death and resurrection of the Messiah

"Love me and gave himself for me" - God's covenant love through which the new Exodus is carried out

If justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing

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## Galatians 3:1-9

The beginning of the central section of the letter (3:1-5:1)

Paul now turns to the issue in Galatia itself

Please don't do that (circumcision) and here's why!

He builds up a picture of the family that God promised to Abraham from the beginning - the beginning of God's rescue plan for the world

After the chaos of Genesis 3-11, God puts things back on track beginning with Genesis 12

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## Galatians 3-4 - The Story of the Exodus

Paul is reading the Bible as a single large story in which he and his hearers find themselves taking their part

He is not proof-texting, nor is he addressing 16th century questions about justification

He is saying that the great single narrative has reached its climax and is played out in the new community that God envisioned in his covenant with Abraham

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## Galatians 3:1-9

“It’s as though someone put a spell on you”

When you received the Spirit, was it through law or by hearing the message and believing it?

Why talk about the Spirit here? Paul is referring to the inheritance God promised to Abraham.

Spirit is the guarantee of that inheritance (Romans 8:23)

You already received the Spirit, therefore you are part of the inheritance

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## Galatians 3:1-9

How does this gift come? *Hearing*

You began with the Spirit, why are you ending with the flesh?

For Paul, “flesh” (*sarx*) carries overtones of the present world

You’ve received the Spirit, don’t go back to the flesh!

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## Galatians 3:1-9

v. 1 - links to end of chapter 2

v. 5 - Does God supply the Spirit through the works of the law or by believing what you have heard?

v. 6 - Abraham - just as Abraham “believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gen. 12:3; 15)

v. 8-9 - what has happened to you in the gospel reaching you is the fulfillment of what God intended to do when he called Abraham in the first place

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# The Genesis Connection

Paul isn't saying that God wants us to acquire a certain amount of moral righteousness and then, because we can't do it, God has to find another way of getting that moral goodness credited to our bank account ("imputed righteousness")

That isn't what Genesis 15 is about: it's about family and inheritance!

Gen. 15 begins with Abraham complaining to God, but God promises him a family. Abraham believes that problem and God reckoned it to him as "righteousness" (covenant faithfulness)

The rest of Genesis 15 is about the covenant God makes

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# Genesis 3:10-18

Abraham's family is to be worldwide, focused on Israel's Messiah. How does the Jewish law relate to that?

Paul's argument - purpose of the law is to reveal that God's people are part of the problem

Deuteronomy - blessings and curses - but even in exile, God can redeem you

(N.T. Wright) - Paul believed days of exile still continuing; but if God had sent his Messiah, then exile was over

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# Curse and Blessing

Because of the curse, God's blessing can't get into the world

Abraham's family incurred the curse, thus the promise wouldn't get through the Gentiles

The law wouldn't make it happen - it keeps the people locked up and safe until the new thing God is going to do

Galatians 3:13 - Messiah, Israel's representative, has rescued - curse of the covenant meted out on him

v. 14 - now the blessing of God can come to all nations

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## A Modern Misunderstanding

We were cursed by sin, so God cursed Jesus instead and that made everything alright.

But how does the death of one man, out of the blue, save us?

It wasn't out of the blue! When Jesus dies under the curse of the law, the era of blessing and promise (Deut. 30) can flow to the world after all (Romans 10:6ff)

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## Another Misunderstanding

Paul persecuted the church because they believed in a crucified Messiah

When God raised Jesus from the dead, this showed that the law was wrong, that the Torah was a bad thing that cursed Jesus. So now we have a law-free gospel

But that is a parody of Paul! For Paul, the law was a good thing that had done its job and run its course

The people of promise carried the problem, but the Messiah has broken through and fulfilled the promise

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## Galatians 3:15-18

“will” is the same word used for “covenant”

What the law does cannot alter the terms of the original covenant

How does the promise work? v. 16 - “seed” = a collective noun - a single family

The Messiah sums up God's people in himself - “in the Messiah”

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# Galatians 3:15-18

The law came 430 years after Abraham - does not alter the original covenant and purpose of God

Law is not the means of inheritance - law was for the Jewish people, Abraham's promise was for the world!

The law was a good gift for a time, but not the means through which God's promise would ultimately come

Reliance on the law creates two families

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# The "Two Family" Problem

This relates to what was going on in Antioch and Galatia

Peter's behavior implied that God had two families

The false Galatian "missionaries" had perpetuated this double-family - you can't have one family by the law

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# The Bottom Line

The love of God established the covenant and is at work despite Israel's brokenness.

The unbreakable love of God has fulfilled the Abrahamic promise

The covenant in Scripture is the means of blessing for the whole creation

The blessing is narrowed down from one family to one man through whom God's purposes would be fulfilled

The message of Jesus is that the power of God has been unleashed for the whole world, enabling one new family of God

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