

Justified by the Faith of Messiah – Part 2

By Dan and Brenda Cathcart

The video version is available at: https://youtu.be/vazBb32_Rc0

The scripture reading is Galatians 3:15-29

In a conversation with a friend the other day, we were discussing Paul's unique apostleship position. There are three things to keep in mind about Paul. First, he is making certain presuppositions that make perfect sense to his audience but can be greatly confusing to us being centuries removed from his time and culture. Second, Paul is the earliest example we have of an apologist. This gives us the ability to peer into the early body of believers and analyze, in detail, the profound nature of their understanding of the role of Messiah. And third, Paul's audience is primarily the Gentile God-fearing believers of the first century. As we study Galatians chapter three, Paul's rhetorical questions along with the presuppositions are directed to the Gentile God-fearers.

Paul begins this section of his letter by referencing the promise to Abraham and that this promise is still in effect.

Galatians 3:15-18 NKJV 15 Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it. 16 Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ. 17 And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. 18 For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise.

These four verses of Paul's epistle to the Galatians sum up the main thrust of his gospel message and the primary avenue to salvation of the Gentiles.

There is so much to be said about these four verses I could spend the entire teaching right here! The covenant spoken of here is the covenant with Abraham; the promise is that through his seed all the nations of the world will be blessed.

Genesis 22:16-18 NKJV 16 and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son - 17 "blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

In Galatians three sixteen, Paul identifies the "seed" as Yeshua Messiah. It is through Messiah, the seed of Abraham whereby all nations will be blessed.

Backing up a verse to the last teaching, we established that the Gentile believers can take hold of the blessing promised to Abraham's seed by faith in Messiah Yeshua.

Galatians 3:14 NKJV 14 that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul's gospel is that through this covenant with Abraham, both Jew and Gentile receive the promise through faith. It is the unwavering faith in this promise which God attributed to Abraham as righteousness. The same righteousness is imparted upon both Jew and Gentile through faith in Messiah Yeshua.

In verses seventeen and eighteen of Galatians chapter three, Paul states that the law, referring to the Torah, which was given some four hundred thirty years after the promise to Abraham, cannot, and does not annul the promise made. The seed of Abraham, being Messiah, is not negated by the giving of the law. In other words, Paul is saying that if the inheritance is through the law, which is exactly the argument posed by those calling for Gentile conversion, i.e. circumcision, then the promise to Abraham that through him the nation would be blessed is then void!

Paul then poses a rhetorical question and answer regarding the law or Torah in the next verse.

Galatians 3:19 NKJV 19 What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.

Here is where a severe misunderstanding of Paul begins. If one approaches this earliest of epistles of Paul with the presupposition that the Torah is superseded by the death, resurrection and ascension of Messiah, then it does indeed appear that Paul is anti-Torah. However, this is contradicted by many other places where Paul upholds the Torah.

What is the question which Paul is addressing? All we are reading is his answer to an unknown inquiry. The traditional Christian take on this is that indeed the law, or Torah remained in effect until the coming of Messiah and was canceled at His death. The real problem with this argument is that it is contradicted by many passages of scripture which tell us that the Torah is eternal. This position would reflect poorly on the character of God. Where did this concept come from? Yeshua did not teach it. On the contrary, He taught just the opposite.

Matthew 5:17-18 NKJV 17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

If Paul indeed meant that Messiah has canceled the Torah then Paul is disqualified as a teacher and an apostle because his conclusion is tantamount to blasphemy. So, the answer must be somewhere else. Hence Paul's rhetorical question about the purpose of the law.

Many times, the simplest of questions require lengthy and complex answers. Given Paul's unique background of not only being an observant, orthodox Jew, but someone with impeccable credentials of training in a classical education, Paul is able to articulate answers to these complex questions in ways his contemporary audience would understand.

Back to the question of the purpose of the law. So far, we have established that justification for both Jew and Gentile is through the promise given to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. Through Abraham's seed which has been identified as Messiah Yeshua.

Paul said that the Torah was added "because of transgression." God added it to identify, define, and condemn sin. It also serves to reveal righteous standards. Paul wrote something similar in Romans.

Romans 5:20-21 NKJV 20 Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, 21 so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the remainder of Galatians chapter three, Paul continues to use questions and answers to illustrate his points in what is known as a Socratic method of instruction.

Galatians 3:20-24 NKJV 20 Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one. 21 Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. 22 But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. 23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

I'm going to focus on verses twenty-three and twenty-four because of a key misunderstanding or slight mistranslation of certain Greek words. Paul's use of the words "we" and "our" indicates the Jewish people, not the Gentiles. Also, the phrase "kept under guard by the law" seems to indicate a kind of imprisonment. Other English translations use the word "restraint" or "confined." The Greek word is #5432 "froo-reh-o" in the Strong's lexicon meaning to guard, as in a sentinel. But it also means to protect. Perhaps implying protection out of love as a parent would protect a child.

Paul goes on to an illustration of the Torah as a schoolmaster or tutor. Keeping the Jewish people safe for Messiah. Paul is relating this illustration in a way that the Galatians would understand it. This "tutor" or schoolmaster is derived from the Greek word "pahee-dag-o-gos" #3807 literally referring to a servant whose job it was to take the children of a wealthy family to school. Classical Greek literature contains many descriptions and stories of a pahee-dag-o-gos. Here is one example of a conversation between Socrates and a boy:

Socrates: "Do your parents let you control yourself, or will they not trust you in that either?"

Boy: "Of course they do not."

Socrates: "But someone is in control of you?"

Boy: "Yes. My pahee-dag-o-gos here."

Socrates: "Is he a slave?"

Boy: "Why certainly he belongs to us."

Socrates: "What a strange thing! A free man controlled by a slave. But how does this pahee-dag-o-gos exert his control over you?"

Boy: "By taking me to the teacher."

When we understand the pahee-dag-o-gos is a guardian and not a jailer, the true meaning and intention of Paul in these verses comes through. The pahee-dag-o-gos represents the status of the Jewish people under the Torah, and Messiah Yeshua is the teacher whom the pahee-dag-o-gos brings the Jewish person. In that light, let's try a retranslation or paraphrase of this passage:

Galatians 3:23-24 TLT Now before faith came, we [the Jewish people] were protected under the law, [kept inside for] the coming faith [that] would be revealed. So then, the [Torah] was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified [i.e. exonerated] by faith.ⁱⁱ

Those under the law were kept and preserved for the coming Messiah. When Paul uses the term “under the law”, he is referring specifically to legal Jewish status, either by birth or by legal conversion.

The Torah accomplished this guardianship by creating moral boundaries which kept Israel inside the parameters of ethical monotheism until the fulness of Messiah was revealed. Paul goes on to explain further in verse twenty-five.

Galatians 3:25 NKJV 25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

As we observed in the conversation between Socrates and the boy, the job of the pahee-dag-o-gos was to bring the student to the teacher and so it was for the Torah with the Jewish people. The purpose of the Torah was and is to bring the Jewish people to the Messiah, the teacher!

But did Paul mean that the Torah is done away with or canceled out by the revelation of Messiah? No. To a large extent, the Jews of Paul’s day had mistaken the Torah as an end rather than a means to the end. And it’s no different in much of the Jewish community today. The Torah is not, and never was a means to earn or gain salvation.

The last four verses of chapter three put the pieces together.

Galatians 3:26-29 NKJV 26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Is there a forfeiture of one’s unique identity in this passage? What does it mean that there is neither Jew nor Greek, etc? There is a common misunderstanding of this concept in most of the Messianic community as well as the mainstream Christian community. Paul also said something similar in his later epistle to the Colossians.

Colossians 3:10-11 NKJV 10 and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, 11 where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

In Ephesians chapter two, Paul uses the term “one new man.”

Ephesians 2:13-15 NKJV 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 15 having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself **one new man** from the two, thus making peace,

This really describes the heart of Paul’s gospel of Gentile inclusion. Understanding what Paul meant by “one new man” and “neither Jew nor Greek” is critical to proper theology. At first glance it appears that Paul is speaking of assimilation and a loss or giving up of identity.

Basic Christian theology views this “one new man” concept as an obliteration of Jewish identity and total absorption of Jews into the Christian world. They call for Jews who come to faith in Messiah to leave

everything Jewish behind them: the ritual practices of the Torah, the feast days, circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath, the calendar, etc.

In the Christian mind, “one new man” implies that there are no longer any Jews in Messiah. Jewish identity is eliminated by Messiah! Over the last two thousand years this is what has happened to the Jewish people who have come to faith in Messiah. Two forces have been in play throughout history. Jews who come to believe in Messiah Yeshua are ostracized by their Jewish family and community thereby losing any place or status in the Jewish community. And once joined to the Christian community, are strongly encouraged, if not forced to leave everything about their Jewish identity behind.

Because of these two forces, Jewish believers have been doomed to be swallowed up by the church. In the Christian world, one new man is a Gentile only!

It is interesting that one would think that the Messianic community would have the proper identity thing figured out. But unfortunately, that is not the case for the majority of history. In Messianic Judaism there is a concept of “One Law” based on several scriptures in the Torah which speak of one law for the Jew and the “stranger who dwells among you”, scriptures such as Exodus 12:49 come to mind.

Exodus 12:49 NKJV 49 "One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you."

But what does this really mean? Are Gentiles obligated to the full extent of the Torah because there is one law for the native born and the stranger? Are Gentile believers obligated under the law because there is neither Jew nor Greek as Paul said that we are all the same in Messiah? We must be careful that we don't take scripture out of its immediate context. The Exodus passage we just read for instance is speaking specifically of Passover as practiced in Temple ritual.

I have personally seen it, time and again in our day, that in much of Messianic Judaism rather than Jews assimilating into a Gentile identity, Gentile “converts” must assimilate into a Jewish identity. The end result of the two theologies is the same, assimilation and loss of identity. D. Thomas Lancaster in his book “The Holy Epistle to the Galatians” summarizes:

One New Man theology says, “since we are the same in Messiah, Jewish believers need not keep Jewish aspects of Torah anymore.”

One Law Theology says, “Since we are the same in Messiah, we all need to keep the Jewish aspects of Torah.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When we step back and reflect on this, we begin to realize that both interpretations of Paul are impossible. The logic just doesn't add up. Paul spends a great deal of time and energy explaining over and over again that Gentiles do not need to take on the commandments that identify a person as a Jew, namely circumcision. And, taking us back to verses fifteen through eighteen of Galatians chapter three, Gentiles do not need to be Jewish to be reckoned as part of the people and kingdom of God! That is achieved through God's promise to Abraham.

Gentiles coming to faith in Messiah Yeshua are obligated to certain aspects of God's Torah but not those which define a person as a Jew. And Jewish believers are still obligated to those covenantal responsibilities incumbent upon them as Jews.

When we study Paul's writings in the context in which they were written. Understanding them in their historic and cultural perspective, we see that Paul drew some clear lines of distinction between Jew and Gentile. This becomes more evident as we study Paul's epistle to the Galatians.

We are indeed one in Messiah, where the wall of separation is broken down and eliminated between Jew and Gentile as Paul wrote to the Ephesians. But that doesn't mean that Jew and Gentile are the same. Each have their own calling. Paul addressed this difference in first Corinthians seven, seventeen and eighteen.

1 Corinthians 7:17-18 NKJV 17 But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. 18 Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised.

The only Identity that we should be taking on is that Identity imparted to us through Messiah! If we belong to Messiah Yeshua, then we are one through Abraham's seed. We are one in the Abrahamic Promise. This is the point at which we Gentiles are grafted into Israel. Abraham is the father of both Jewish and Gentile believers in faith for the scripture says of Abraham, "I will make you a father of many nations."

Study Questions:

1. Regarding the concept of "one law," we cited Exodus 12:49 which speaks about one law for both Jew and the stranger who dwells among you. We identified this verse in context of the partaking of the Passover lamb as practiced in Temple ritual. What other passages of scripture speak of "one law" and what is the context of those passages? You might want to review the findings of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.
2. How does the apostle Paul envision unity among Jews and Gentiles without conformity to a single identity? How is his concept of "oneness" applied in his epistles?
3. In the same vein as question #2, how does Paul identify the differing roles of Jew and Gentile?
4. When God made a covenant with Abraham, the sign of this covenant was circumcision. Throughout Paul's epistles, he insists that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised to receive salvation through Yeshua whom he identifies as Abraham's seed. If Gentiles, without circumcision are "grafted in" through the covenant with Abraham, then what is circumcision a sign of?
5. In Galatians 3:19 Paul asks, "What purpose then does the law serve?" What deeper message is Paul trying to get across to his reader with this question? In the post-Messiah world, if salvation is available to those who are not "under the law," What's the point in being Jewish? Why have the Torah at all?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

Bonus: Imagining if the church over the centuries since the apostolic times had not insisted that the Jewish people who come to Messiah give up their Jewish identity and assimilate into the Gentile world. How would Jewish life be different today? How would the Church be different today had it upheld and honored Jewish identity?

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ⁱ Lysis 4 as quoted by D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Holy Epistle to the Galatians*, 2014, p181

ⁱⁱ D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Holy Epistle to the Galatians*, 2014, p182

ⁱⁱⁱ D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Holy Epistle to the Galatians*, 2014, p192