

May 15
Lesson 11 (NIV)

FREEDOM AND THE LAW

DEVOTIONAL READING: Galatians 3:18–29

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Galatians 3

GALATIANS 3:18–29

¹⁸ For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

¹⁹ Why, then, was the law given at all? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator. ²⁰ A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.

²¹ 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. ²² 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.

²³ 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. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

KEY TEXT

*If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.—
Galatians 3:29*

GOD FREES AND REDEEMS

Unit 3: Liberating Letters

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. All Skate
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Inheritance (Galatians 3:18–19a)
 - A. Given by Promise (v. 18)
The Audacity of Faith
 - B. Questions of the Law (v. 19a)
- II. Law (Galatians 3:19b–21)
 - A. Added for Transgressions (vv. 19b–20)
 - B. Limitations of the Law (v. 21)
- III. Faith (Galatians 3:22–25)
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- IV. Unity (Galatians 3:26–29)
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Conclusion

- A. Time to Grow Up
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

GalatiaGuh-*lay*-shuh.

GalileansGal-uh-*lee*-unz.

Judaizers*Joo*-duh-*ize*-ers.

Introduction

A. All Skate

By putting on roller skates, a person’s movement is transformed as he or she glides across the pavement. One of the best settings for roller skating is at a roller-skating rink. In addition to being an easy place to skate, rinks often include colorful lights and engaging music.

Rinks might have times set apart for particular groups of skaters—times designated specifically for boys, girls, parents, grandparents, and so on. There may even be times for couples to skate. After a few minutes of the special skate, the announcer proclaims over the loudspeaker, “It’s all-skate time! Everyone, come skate!” No longer does anyone feel left out. All skaters are welcome to participate!

In this week's lesson, the apostle Paul made a sweeping declaration. This declaration invited all people to hear and experience the promises of God's transforming good news.

B. Lesson Context

The Galatian Christians were a community of believers in the region of Galatia, located in modern-day Turkey. Paul's missionary journeys took him through this region and its cities. Depending on whether "Galatia" is understood in a political sense or a demographic sense, it was during either Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13–14) or his second (16:1–18:22) that he first taught the gospel message to the Galatians (see 4:12–13).

The year Paul wrote the Galatian epistle is unknown. Some research has proposed that it was written as early as AD 48 or as late as AD 57/58. The latter would imply that Paul wrote this epistle after the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. If this were the case, part of Galatians includes Paul's retelling of the council's key concerns: circumcision as part of adherence to the Law of Moses (Galatians 2:1–10; see Acts 15:5). These same concerns were of importance among the Galatian churches.

The Galatians had received the gospel message from Paul (Acts 16:6; 18:23; Galatians 1:11–12), but there were some among them who tried to add to the message. These individuals taught that circumcision as part of adherence to the Law of Moses was a requirement for salvation; Paul declared that to be "a different gospel" (1:6; see 2:14). Advocates for this approach were known as Judaizers because they called for Gentile believers to adhere to the distinctions of Jewish law. The Judaizers' beliefs were understandable. From their point of view, Israel was and continued to be the distinct people of God. It was to Israel that God had revealed himself, given his law, and prescribed circumcision as a mark of his covenant (Genesis 17:7–14).

Paul urged the Galatian churches to reject the Judaizers' addition to the gospel message (Galatians 1:7–9). Paul reflected on his own "extremely zealous" experience in Judaism (1:14) as he highlighted his inability to follow the law to the point of justification (2:15–21). Through Christ, the promise of salvation was to be revealed to the whole world (3:6–9). Paul went on to show the unifying nature of that salvation for all who would believe in Christ.

I. Inheritance

(GALATIANS 3:18–19a)

A. Given by Promise (v. 18)

18a. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on the promise;

That Paul began with *for* indicates a continuation of his preceding discussion on *the inheritance* from God (Galatians 3:15–17). This inheritance implies eternal life and being counted righteous by God—for those having faith in Jesus (see Acts 20:32; Hebrews 9:15). Paul's concern was the means by which the inheritance was received.

If the promised life and righteousness came via *the law*, then God's promises—especially his promises to Abraham—would be of little value (see commentary on Galatians 3:18b, below). The law's role was not to provide entrance into God's *promise*. The law, given to Moses, was introduced long after God's promise (see 3:17). This fact provided a distinction for God's

relationship with his people; he desires relationship, not regulation. If God's inheritance was received by following the law, then his promises would be of no value and faith would be irrelevant (see Romans 4:13–16).

18b. but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.

The *promise of God*, made to *Abraham* centuries prior, designated a blessing (Genesis 12:1–3), a reward and heir (15:1–6), and a guarantee of descendants (17:1–8). In contrast to the demands of the law, God's gracious act was in giving the promise. Ultimately, God's promises would be fulfilled in Christ (Galatians 3:16). This observation led to Paul's essential question, next.

B. Questions of the Law (v. 19a)

19a. Why, then, was the law given at all?

By asking this question, Paul anticipated the Galatians' response regarding the promise. If God's inheritance came through his promise, then why should people of God continue to rely on *the law* for salvation? The practice of anticipating the readers' questions is common in Paul's writings (examples: Romans 3:1, 3, 5, 7; 6:15; 7:7). It was his way of addressing their (assumed) concerns since he couldn't be with them in person.

II. Law

(GALATIANS 3:19b–21)

A. Added for Transgressions (vv. 19b–20)

19b. It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.

The word *transgressions* indicates a violation of a boundary. In this instance, the boundary transgressed is the law (see Romans 2:23). The law *was added* to reveal the nature and extent of human transgression (4:15; 5:13, 20). As a result, people became conscious of their violations (3:20; 7:12–13). Through the Law of Moses, the Israelites had common language for understanding their transgressions and enforcing discipline. However, the law's application was limited as it served to reveal, rather than heal, transgressions.

The law would apply *until* a specific time ordained by God. Galatian Judaizers required obedience to the Law of Moses to become an heir of Abraham's *promise* (see Lesson Context). However, Paul nullified their argument by noting a temporal aspect: the law was fulfilled by the coming of Abraham's *Seed*, Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:16).

19c. The law was given through angels and entrusted to a mediator.

The law's inferiority was due, in part, to its mediated nature. While Scripture never calls Moses *a mediator*, God gave him the law and entrusted it to his care (see Exodus 20:19–22; 21:1; 34:29; Leviticus 26:46). Other Scriptures indicate a belief that *angels* served a role in revealing *the law* (see Acts 7:53; Hebrews 2:2). However, God's promise is without angelic mediation. Therefore it is more enduring.

20. A mediator, however, implies more than one party; but God is one.

That the law was given through *a mediator* did not strengthen its influence. In fact, the opposite occurred. The mediated nature of the law differed from God's direct interaction with

Abraham (Genesis 12:1). For believers, Christ Jesus serves as the mediator between God and humans (1 Timothy 2:5). As a result, there exists a new relationship between God and humanity, mediated through the “better promises” of Christ Jesus (Hebrews 8:6; see 9:15; 12:24). The law differentiated Jew from Gentile. *But God is one* and his people are one through faith in Christ (Romans 3:29–30; see commentary on Galatians 3:28, below).

B. Limitations of the Law (v. 21)

21a. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!

Paul again anticipated a rebuttal, so he cited a possible concern for the Galatians. *The law* and *the promises* are not against each other. Both are *of God* and both are holy (see Romans 7:12; 1 Timothy 1:8). However, each serves a different purpose.

The Greek phrase behind *absolutely not* is a favorite expression of Paul’s (see Romans 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11; 1 Corinthians 6:15; Galatians 2:17; 6:14). It is an expression of emphatic rejection.

21b. For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.

The *law* was never intended to give eternal *life*. This is why Paul emphasized that the giving of the law came years after God’s covenant and Abraham’s faith (Galatians 3:17). If *righteousness* could *come by the law*, then the work of Christ, particularly his death, would be “for nothing” (2:21). As the law shows humans their sinful ways, it follows God’s holy intention (see Romans 7:7–10).

III. Faith

(GALATIANS 3:22–25)

A. Promised in Christ (vv. 22–23)

22. 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.

It is unclear which *Scripture* Paul has in mind. Perhaps he recalled the Law of Moses that called “cursed” those people who did not conform to “the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 27:26). The law concluded that both Jews and Gentiles were “all *under ... sin*” (Romans 3:9), and all people were thereby guilty (3:10–18).

Because Paul declared that all were guilty under the law, all were unfit to receive life on the basis of the law. This serves to contrast the law’s condemnation with the life provided by *what was promised*. Only those who believe will be counted righteous. The righteous person will be considered a recipient of the promise (Romans 4:3, 13, 16), conveyed by the “seed” of Abraham, Jesus (Galatians 3:16, 19).

God’s plan never depended on the law. Through *faith in Jesus Christ* and his faithfulness to follow the call of his Father, Jew and Gentile can experience the blessed promise of redemption. *Those who believe* become God’s children, regardless of their ethnic identity (see John 1:12–13).

23. 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.

For Paul, *this faith* was more than a person's mental trust or a deep-seated hope. Instead, he attributed faith to God's way of dealing with humanity. Jesus' faithfulness in following his Father was the way God revealed his righteousness to the world (see Romans 1:17; 4:16; Ephesians 3:12).

Before Christ's arrival, *the law* kept humans *in custody*. This might imply that the law served as a restraint, showing the extent of sin through Scripture (see commentary on Galatians 3:22, above).

Paul envisioned a new era of God's working among humanity. This era was one in which God's promise was *revealed* through *faith*. Paul drew demarcations between the era of law and the era of faith, with Christ's faithfulness in his work being the moment of transition.

B. Deficiencies of the Law (vv. 24–25)

24. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

Paul's next metaphor softened the description as he described *the law* as *our guardian*. The illustration referred to the duties of certain servants in ancient Greco-Roman culture. These servants supervised the education of the household heir, keeping a close eye on the heir's behavior, character formation, and discipline. Eventually the heir would mature and no longer need this guardian.

Similarly, the law was only needed for a time. It served its purpose *until Christ came* and brought an end to the law's power for justification (Romans 10:4). The law could only do so much for humanity in regard to the promises of God. Humans could never be *justified* by the law (see Acts 13:39).

25. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

Paul's Galatian audience held that justification was a "both-and" construct. Their understanding of justification required both following the law and expressing faith in Christ. To that end, Paul highlighted the superiority and finality of *faith* in bringing justification. Since *this faith has come*, the law—serving as a guide—is *no longer* needed.

This fact is because the law has been fulfilled in Christ (see Matthew 5:17). Because the law could do only so much, God sent his Son to fulfill the requirements of the law (see Romans 8:1–4). What the law could not accomplish, God accomplished through Jesus.

IV. Unity

(GALATIANS 3:26–29)

A. Resulting by Faith (vv. 26–27)

26. So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,

Previously, Paul had been speaking to an audience that would identify with his Jewish background, a collective "we" (see Galatians 3:23–25). Regarding knowledge and observance of the law, Paul was an expert (see Philippians 3:3–7).

Paul's *you ... all* included every believer in his Galatian audience, Jew or Gentile. The Judaizers' insistence on adherence to the Law of Moses was of great concern for Paul. Regardless of whether a person followed the law, all people could be considered the *children of God*. This was a phrase first used to describe the biological descendants of Abraham, those who were given the Law of Moses (see Deuteronomy 14:1–2). However, a new era had arrived, one in which God's children were no longer marked by their observance of the law. Instead, they were marked by their expression of *faith* in *Christ Jesus* (see Romans 8:14–16).

27. for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

So the Galatian Christians might demonstrate their faith in Christ, Paul reminded them that they had been *baptized into Christ*. Paul often stressed the importance of baptism for the believer. Baptism unites the believer with the death of Christ and the glory of his resurrection (Romans 6:3–7). Further, baptism brought unity and a transformation “by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The result of faith, demonstrated by baptism, was that Jewish and Gentile believers would become unified. To *have clothed yourselves with Christ* implied putting to death the sinful nature and being renewed with a new nature, transformed by Christ (Romans 13:13–14; Colossians 3:5–14). The prophet Isaiah rejoiced when God “clothed me with garments of salvation” (Isaiah 61:10). For Paul the garments of salvation were the work of Christ and the expression of faith in him.

B. Regardless of the Law (vv. 28–29)

28. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The result of baptism into Christ is the formation of a new self in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). This resulted in unity with others also in Christ. To reinforce this reality, Paul upended notable social structures of a first-century audience.

First, Paul addressed concerns of ethnic divisions centered on the Law of Moses. Of main concern for a *Jew* was adherence to the law, most notably the law's prescriptions for circumcision. However, the law would not have been binding for a *Gentile*. As a result of God's new economy of salvation, though, circumcision was no longer applicable for God's people. The identity of God's people expanded to include Gentiles (see 1 Corinthians 7:19; Colossians 3:11).

Second, the structure of the Roman Empire required an economy of slavery. In the structure of God's economy of salvation, though, the *slave* and the *free* person are equal; both find eternal life in Christ Jesus. Under Christ, a slave was counted as “a dear brother” (Philemon 16).

Third, Paul's statement that *nor is there male and female* is not meant to disregard gender distinction or address fully the varied beliefs on the roles of men and women. Given his audience, Paul was likely addressing the limitations of circumcision. Both men and women, created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), are baptized into the unified fellowship of believers.

Regardless of any differences, through faith all can become God's children (Galatians 3:26). The children of God are *one* through the peace of *Christ Jesus* (see Ephesians 2:14–18).

29. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Having confirmed the diverse yet unified nature of God's people, Paul explored the implications of this diversity. All people who express faith can *belong to* the body of *Christ*.

As a result, the promises made to Christ are applicable to all people who have faith (see Galatians 3:16). The promises made to *Abraham's seed* are fulfilled through those people in Christ as they become heirs with him (Romans 8:17).

Heirs according to the promise will attain more than an earthly heir might attain (see Galatians 4:7). Being in Christ implies having full access to the promise of his blessing. Further, it means his Spirit would be present in the lives of believers (see 2 Corinthians 1:20–22).

Conclusion

A. Time to Grow Up

It was time for the Galatian church to mature. First, they needed to acknowledge that they were no longer under the law as the way to attain God's righteousness. They were heirs of God with full familial rights to God's promises.

Second, they needed to realize that following the Law of Moses no longer marked the children of God. Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female—all could inherit God's blessing.

Is there something in which we place our faith that is other than the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Embrace Christ and live confidently as sons and daughters of God! When it comes down to it, do we stand with Paul on the bedrock that all believers are one in Christ Jesus?

B. Prayer

Our Father, thank you that we are your children through faith in Christ Jesus. Help us to live in the freedom we have as heirs according to the promise of your Son. Show us how to live in unity with all of your children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Through Christ we are offered a life that the law could never provide.¹
