

Galatians 3: The Foolishness of Returning

Having used Galatians 2 as a springboard to further his exposition of truth regarding the old and new covenants, Paul now uses Galatians 3 to continue to show the foolishness of returning to the old covenant. This discussion began in Galatians 1:6-10 where Paul is amazed that these Galatian Christians turned back so quickly. Paul now spends the entirety of chapter 3 developing three arguments for his audience to consider.

Paul's three arguments range from the personal to the scriptural, and finally to the practical. Each shows how senseless it would be for one who has received salvation through the new covenant to then return to the old.

Argument 1: The Personal Argument (vv. 1-5)

Having already defended the gospel and charged all Christians not to return to the old law, Paul first argues from a personal standpoint. Keeping in mind that he helped start these churches and taught them in-person, Paul outlines the foolishness of returning to the old covenant by reminding them of three facts:

A. Their Knowledge of the Crucifixion of Christ (v.1)

The crucifixion of Christ is the center point of all Christian history. By starting with the death of Christ, Paul brings to light the central argument as to the reason no one should return to the old covenant, nor should any portion of the old covenant still be considered binding—the reason is the crucifixion of Christ.

- Read Romans 7:1-4 and Hebrews 9:15-17. Why is Christ's death a vital moment concerning the two covenants?

B. Their Receiving of the Spirit (vv. 2, 5)

With a clear perspective on the crucifixion of Christ, Paul now reminds these Christians of their having received the Spirit. Paul's reference here is to their receiving one of the nine spiritual gifts recorded in 1 Corinthians 12:8-11.

- Read Acts 2:22 and Hebrews 2:3-4. What was the purpose of miracles?

God's word calls our attention to the fact that miracles were assigned to confirm the words spoken by Christ and the apostles. The reception of these gifts was to call attention to the truth that what was being taught, the new covenant, was from God.

C. Their Starting point (v. 3)

Paul now moves to ask his audience one more question. If they had received both blessings and salvation through "the Spirit," are they now being perfected by the flesh? Paul here is paralleling Spirit and flesh with the new covenant and the old covenant. Yet, only one had the power to save.

- Read Hebrews 9:9-10. What could the old covenant and its rituals not do?
- Read Hebrews 9:14-15. What can the new covenant and the blood of Christ do?

Paul's question in verse 3 is to remind these Christians of the perfecting power of the new covenant, a power not found within the old covenant. So then, why would anyone wish to return to such a covenant? Paul gives the answer in verse 1: it is because of foolishness.

Argument 2: The Scriptural Argument (vv. 6-18)

For his next argument, Paul appeals to scripture. As we will see, not only is there a personal reason for Paul's audience not to return to the old covenant but there is a scriptural reason as well.

A. Abraham, Our Example (vv. 6-9)

Paul's first reference to scripture is to call attention to the person and righteousness of Abraham by quoting Genesis 15:6. To argue using Abraham is to say that one can be in a right relationship with God without the law (Aaron, I suggest a re-wording of this sentence. I'm not sure what you mean.)

- Read Galatians 3:17. How long was it after Abraham until the law came into effect?
- Read James 2:21-23. Was Abraham righteous without the law?

Paul's argument from Abraham is in direct contradiction with those who have come in teaching the necessity of circumcision and the superiority of physical Israel. Because Abraham was righteous, "four hundred and thirty years" before these laws came into effect, his example teaches the possibility of a right relationship with God without the law.

B. The Curse of the Law (vv. 10-14)

In what is one of Paul's most straightforward arguments against a return to the old law, he quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 to remind his audience of the curse of the old law. Paul's point is that they are cursed in returning to the old law because the old law itself teaches a person cannot find justification through it.

- Read Galatians 3:11-12. How is a person justified? Can justification be accomplished through the old covenant?

Paul argues from the old covenant itself by reminding the people who would return to it that "the just shall live by faith," but the old covenant was not of faith. Therefore, in arguing for a return to the old covenant for justification, one is arguing against the old covenant itself.

Argument 3: The Practical Argument (vv. 15-29)

Paul concludes his three-fold argument with a practical look into the purpose of the old covenant and God's method of justification. To show his point, Paul shows the priority of the promise and the purpose of the law.

A. The Priority of the Promise Over the Law (vv. 15-18)

Paul's first appeal in his practical argument is to remind his audience of the priority of the promise over the law. This priority comes from the fact that the promise came before the law. In quoting a compilation of Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 24:7, Paul is showing that God's promise to Abraham of blessing the nations through Christ came four hundred and thirty years before the covenant God made with man.

- What does Paul say the law cannot do to the covenant made beforehand?

B. The Purpose of the Law (vv. 19-25)

Paul's final argument against returning to the old covenant is to help his audience understand the purpose of the law. It is essential to remember God's laws always have a purpose; while we may not be under the old covenant, it still has meaning in our lives.

- Read Romans 15:4. What reason do we have to study the Old Testament?

While God fills the old covenant with truths meant to teach us about God and give us hope, it is no longer in effect because of Christ's death. To finalize his argument, Paul calls attention to the two primary purposes of the old covenant.

Ba. Because of transgressions (vv.19-23)

Paul continues to build upon the superiority of the "Promise" over the "Law" by saying the law was "added." Bennie Cryer says of this point: "[i]t was not added to complete the promise or provide something that is lacking." God's original promise to Abraham was sure, and nothing was needed for it to be better. Instead, the people who would be instrumental in fulfilling the law were imperfect. Because of this fact, God gave them the old covenant as a means of teaching them what was right and wrong.

- Read Romans 7:7. What did Paul learn from the law?

God's purpose for the old law was to provide guidance about what was right and wrong until Christ would come and put into place His new and better covenant. Otherwise, the people would be left to their own devices and might wander from God.

Bb. To Act as a Tutor (vv. 23-25)

During man's time of waiting for Christ to establish His new covenant, God used the old law as a "tutor." It is essential to understand what Paul meant by this statement. During the first century, when Paul was writing Galatians, a tutor was not a teacher. Instead, a tutor during the time of this writing was one who would pick up children from their homes and take them to their school or instructor for their education (Vines). We then understand Paul's argument to speak of how the old covenant brought the children of Israel along until Christ came. At this point, the tutor, the old covenant, would surrender its authority over its child, the new covenant.

This same picture is accurate for Paul's audience. The old law was to bring them to the new covenant. Upon reaching this point, the old covenant would no longer have authority over God's people. For this reason, Paul concludes by saying, "we are no longer under a tutor" (Galatians 3:25).

- Read Colossians 2:13-14 and Hebrews 7:18-19. What has happened to the old law? Under what law are we now to be subjected?

Conclusion

As Paul concludes this portion of his argument against returning to the old covenant, he leaves his audience with the greatest hope. Now offered to all humankind is the blessing of being an heir of Abraham (Galatians 3:26-29). What better conclusion could Paul give than to remind every Christian of his/her inheritance in Christ? In being a son of God through faith, that is through obedience to the gospel of Christ, each person—regardless of nationality, social status, or gender—is offered the opportunity to be an heir according to the promise made to Abraham. This opportunity was not afforded under the old covenant.

Discussion Questions

- The temptation of the Christians in Galatia is to return to the old covenant. While this temptation may not be the same for you, what are some areas in which you struggle to remain faithful?
- Paul begins his argument by asking Christians to remember how they started their Christian walk. How can remembering your conversion help keep you from returning to a past life of sin?