

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – May 13, 2018

[Galatians 3:28-4:7](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

(Note: This text is NOT one of the given readings for this particular week in the Revised Common Lectionary. It was selected thematically to accompany Children's Ministry Sunday this week. So don't worry that the links below take you to materials for another calendar date – that is simply an aberration for this week!)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and "wonderings"

Commentary on Galatians 3:23-29 (From the *Homiletics* archive; "Heirs of the Promise" – June 25, 1995)

In the Galatian Christian community, there was evidently a faction that kept insisting that the primarily Gentile Galatians must follow the Jewish law if they wished to be truly Christian. What is more, as is apparent from Paul's response, these law-advocates focused on both the Abrahamic covenant and the later Mosaic law. If there was anyone well-acquainted with the promises extended to Israel through both these paths, it was the elite-educated, erstwhile-zealous Pharisee, Paul. Heightened by his obvious emotional attachment to the Galatian Christians, Paul's argument against these Judaizers is both theologically brilliant and emotionally barbed.

Immediately prior to today's epistle reading, Paul highlights the issue of the Abrahamic promise. He disarms his opponents' argument by splitting grammatical hairs (heirs?), making the bold claim that the Abrahamic promise extended to only a single offspring -- none other than Christ. In addition, Paul noted with a certain acerbity and asperity that there was this small matter of the 430 years between the time Abraham was deemed "righteous" before God and God's gift of the law to Moses (see Galatians 3:6). Because of that hiatus, Paul argued, there was a long interval when Abraham and his descendants were declared "righteous" without the law.

This week's epistle reading begins with Galatians 3:23 as Paul continues to describe what the true nature and function of the law has been for humanity. Instead of being the gateway to justification before God, the law was a watchful jailer, keeping people from any further transgressions (3:19). At times, the law may have seemed more like a benevolent guardian, but it was still keeping men and women imprisoned. The law served this necessary, but inferior purpose until the "time of faith" arrived. In verse 24, Paul clarifies that "time" as "until Christ came."

Paul describes the law previous to Christ's coming as being "our pedagogue." Today, that term is usually connected simply with the teaching or schoolmasterly instruction of children -- suggesting that if this were the law's function, it was perhaps gently educative in its mission. In Paul's day, however, a pedagogue was a specific individual. In Roman and Greek families, the pedagogue was a slave whose entire job was to carefully supervise young children, in and out of the home. The pedagogue was not primarily a teacher but was an "enforcer" -- making sure strict rules of discipline and correct behavior were practiced. It is this rather militant, unyielding portrait Paul paints of the law as our "pedagogue." Still, the law's role did

serve to ready humans for the time of Christ, when the time for being "justified by faith" would finally be at hand.

The time of justification is now here, Paul declares in verse 25. The pedagogue is now relieved of its duties. The law is no longer in charge. Actually, the transformation that occurs during this time is twofold. First, the guardianship of the law is replaced by faith in Jesus Christ. Second, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise now goes into effect. According to Paul's previous argument, the heir to the Abrahamic covenant/promise could only be Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:8). But now that this Christ has come, all the Galatians, all the Gentiles, become true "children of God" through their faith in Christ. Actually, it might be helpful to think of this new faithful generation as "sons and daughters" instead of "children" of God. While the NRSV tries to avoid a sexist rendition ("sons") of this text, the fact that the newly faithful ones are released from the pedagogue -- that is, the one who oversees the discipline of minor children -- indicates that in a sense, these faithful are now grown offspring of God -- sons and daughters.

The key that opens the prison door of the law for all believers is their baptism "into Christ." The context here seems to suggest Paul has more in mind than simply baptism in Christ's name. "Into Christ" implies a state of fellowship or union together with Christ of all believers. Paul describes those who have experienced this baptism as being "clothed with Christ." The metaphor itself intends to suggest more than a mere exterior layer, but to "take on the character of" or "to become as" Christ himself. Thus baptized into Christ, we become one with Christ, and thus, are united in a bond of fellowship stronger than any other existing force.

Paul's excitement over the power of this baptismal unity becomes evident in verse 28. There is evidence that one of the legal requirements Paul's opponents were advocating among Gentile Christians was the rite of circumcision. This was a rite that obviously symbolized the difference between Jew and Gentile -- that held groups apart. Now Paul triumphantly holds up baptism into Christ as the act that breaks down all barriers and blurs all distinctions. Not only does Paul declare that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile (Greek), he also insists that even the other major categories of distinction no longer hold -- there is no "slave or free" nor even any "male or female." Dissolving these differences also suggests that in Christ there is no hierarchy -- morally (Jew/Gentile), economically (free/slave) or socially (male/female).

Paul's argument concludes by returning to the theme of 3:7, 9, 14 and 16 -- the identity of the true descendants of Abraham. There is no longer any doubt about who can lay claim to the promised Abrahamic inheritance -- it is all those who "belong to Christ." The promise of righteousness which God granted to Abraham and his offspring is fulfilled. All those in Christ may lay claim to God's promised gift.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this text (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?