

GALATIANS—WEEK 2

THE KEY TO THE COVENANT



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Galatians, Week 2 — The Key to the Covenant
The Cover Picture is Peter and Paul by El Greco (1541–1614)
It depicts the confrontation described in Galatians 2:11.

Paul's explanation of his opposition to forcing circumcision begins by describing a confrontation he had with Peter, where he shows Peter's action to be self-contradictory. Paul goes on to show that the law can't rid us of the curse.

Only Jesus can do that.

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1 Galatians 2:11–14 (ESV)

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

This is amazing. Even though Paul isn't a new convert (having had at least fourteen years of training), he's still very junior to Peter. His calling out Peter on a matter of doctrine is bold bordering on improper. Even today, many cultures have hard and fast rules against junior people confronting their superiors like this. Back then it was even more extreme.

So, once again, Christianity is redefining culture. Proper reasoning of scripture, not seniority, is what matters.

And, if that wasn't enough, Paul confronts *Peter before them all*. Wow. Some would see this as an attempt to challenge Peter's alpha status.

But Peter isn't alpha; Jesus is alpha.

One of the great beauties of Christianity is that we don't have a pecking order. Everyone is a servant of everyone else. This is by design.

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” Mark 9:33–35 (ESV)

The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. — Matthew 23:11–12 (ESV)

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. — John 13:14–16 (ESV)

The servant motif is all over the New Testament and all over Christianity, even today. This is one thing we haven't forgotten; it's just too ingrained.

But that doesn't mean we practice true servanthood. We know not to self-promote, but our sinful nature drives us to care about things our Lord said not to.

We just can't help ourselves.

2 Galatians 2:15–21

“We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

“But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

The key to understanding this passage is to know what Paul is referring to when he says, *“For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.”* What did he destroy?

Paul didn’t destroy anything; it’s a hypothetical he’s using to argue (to Peter) against rebuilding something that you just tore down. So what did Peter just tear down?

Peter had been eating with Gentiles but then stopped. This upset the daylights out of Paul; that’s what spawned this confrontation. So, what was torn down was the metaphorical wall separating Jews from Gentiles. (However, this generalizes to tearing down slavery to the whole law, not just separation from those yucky, unclean Gentiles.)

Thus, if Peter did a big “oops” and rebuilt the wall of separation, he’s declaring that due to his previous eating with Gentiles he was *a transgressor*. With that straightened out, let’s look at the whole passage.

Paul starts by pointing out that *we who are Jews by nature*, know full well the doctrine of being *justified by faith in Christ*. Then Paul refines the point by using a rhetorical device that will become one of his favorites later when he writes *Romans*. He poses a deliberate misinterpretation of the point and then shoots it down with, *“Certainly not!”* The Greek (μὴ γένοιτο, may gen-oi-taw) literally means, “not that it might come to pass.” Some translations render “may gen-oi-taw” as “God forbid!” which is a paraphrase but at least retains the sense of future prohibition, as opposed to the purely present tense, *“Certainly not!”*

Then comes the key explanation. This relationship with the law has been torn down, never to be rebuilt again. Paul even says that he *“died to the law.”* Christ isn’t a *minister of sin* because things like eating with Gentiles aren’t actually sin.

I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.

Paul schooling Peter on this is beautiful. Each Christian has a unique set of talents and gifts. Though Peter is senior, Paul’s background includes training that a fisherman doesn’t get. Peter understands that and so listens to Paul. Everyone is comfortable with their role.

3 Galatians 3:1–9

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?

Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.

Pay attention to the references to Abraham here, especially the words, “*sons of Abraham*.” Also note Paul’s use of the word “flesh” (σάρκι, sarki in Greek).

Remember, it was Abraham who instituted circumcision—literally a work of the “flesh”—which is the key issue in this epistle. So, is circumcision what makes one a son of Abraham?

The Judaizers thought so, and used the concept of being sons of Abraham as their argument for circumcision. That’s a fair point; Abraham’s sons have, in the past, all been circumcised. It was the sign of the covenant, but that’s all. Being circumcised doesn’t completely fulfill the covenant.

But Abraham was also the father of faith. And faith isn’t just a “sign” of the covenant; it completely fulfills the covenant. *Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.*

Paul bases his argument on the new sign of the covenant—the Holy Spirit—and its direct connection to faith. The Holy Spirit is more than just a sign or a symbol of something—it is the something—and, as such, it’s far more convincing than any argument the Judaizers might make.

Paul doesn’t have to convince them of the importance of the Spirit; that’s obvious.

The key to any apologetic case is the assumptions it makes. You have to start on solid ground to stay on solid ground.

Paul’s slam-dunk argument is nearly complete when he poses the question, “*Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?*”

Paul knows that they did receive the Holy Spirit and that it was by faith. Most importantly, Paul knows that they know this too. So, having locked down that the Spirit came by faith, Paul sets the hook with, “*Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?*”

The case for circumcision is in ashes. The rest is just to round out the complete doctrine.

4 Galatians 3:10–14

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.”

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Having shot down the Judaizers’ argument for circumcision, Paul now shows how important this all is. He does that by quoting a number of passages in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 27:26, Habakkuk 2:4, Leviticus 18:5, and Deuteronomy 21:23). Paul is using the Judaizers’ own words against them. Their whole case is based on Old Testament law.

But remember, this is written to Gentiles. They aren’t familiar with the Old Testament. So, don’t look to the context of these OT passages to discern Paul’s meaning. This isn’t about the passages that the quotes are taken from. The quotes stand alone.

Paul uses three quotes to show that the Judaizers’ approach leads only to being cursed, while *the just shall live by faith*. Then he uses another quote to show how it was Christ who took the curse for us.

But Paul’s last point is the key. Christ taking the curse is how *the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles*.

The whole argument comes together to make it feel like Gentiles getting circumcised is a clumsy attempt at imitating being Jews. Besides being ineffective, that misses the point.

The law isn’t the key to the promise in the first place.

We all memorize how faith is the key, but we tend to leave it at that. I’ve never seen a Sunday School class on how to strengthen your faith. The closest might be an apologetics class on how to defend your faith to an unbeliever. No one wants to have a class on defending the faith against our own doubts.

In a class of thirty adults, there will be thirty different faiths. The differences will mostly be tiny, but they’re left untouched. We’re afraid of offending anyone, so we don’t talk about this.

And we avoid like the plague talking about levels of certainty. Whatever it is we believe, we must be absolutely certain that’s the exact true doctrine. We might allow some wiggle room in eschatology—post-millennial vs. pre-millennial vs. amillennial—but that’s about it. Saying, “I’m not sure,” is worse than saying, “I don’t buy it.”

The result is faith starvation. Some of the most important and useful subjects are never addressed.

5 Galatians 3:15–20 (ESV)

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

This is classic Pauline reasoning. He starts with a strictly logical point. All covenants are, by nature, permanent. The covenant with Abraham predates the law by more than four centuries. The law *does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God*.

Paul closes this loop by pointing out that the promised inheritance couldn't have been conditioned on the law because then it wouldn't be a promise.

But then what's the point of the law? *It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made* (that is Christ).

In other words, the law clarified our transgressions. Without the law, we might be aware that we're not following God, but we couldn't say exactly how. Now we can.

Without the law, our need for a savior wouldn't be so obvious.

This is an essential part of Christian doctrine. It isn't legalism for the law to define right and wrong. Legalism is when our obedience to the law determines salvation.

Forgiveness depends on having something to forgive. Without the law, there's nothing to forgive—or at least nothing that's clear to us.

Thus, we should respect the law and pay attention to it. The ceremonial parts are gone, but the moral law is the foundation of our civilization.

The big problem with things like circumcision is it makes people feel like they've arrived. That's poison. The last thing Christians need is to be satisfied with themselves. Note Paul's anguish in Romans 7:18–20.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (ESV)

Our constant failings should drive us to the cross afresh every morning.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do people treat their pastors like normal people?
2. When have you seen a senior Christian learn from a junior one?
3. Having begun in the Spirit, how should we advance toward perfection?
4. What do we need to have a class on?
5. Do you sometimes have the level of frustration that Paul expresses in Romans 7?

Items for prayer: