

GALATIANS 3 COMMENTARY SAMPLE – The Bible Knowledge Commentary (BKC)

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DAY 1

III. Doctrinal: A Defense of Justification by Faith (chaps. 3–4)

In the first two chapters of the epistle Paul established the divine origin of his apostleship and his message. Then he turned to the Galatians who were being urged to add works to faith, to keep the Mosaic Law in addition to placing faith in Christ as the grounds of acceptance before God. The Galatian Christians would receive, the Judaizers thought, a more complete salvation and a greater sanctification if they would obey the Law. But, Paul argued, to supplement the work of Christ is to supplant it. There can only be one way of salvation, and that is by faith in Christ alone.

A. *Vindication of the doctrine (chap. 3).*

1. BY THE EXPERIENCE OF THE GALATIANS (3:1–5).

3:1. Paul's tone was direct and severe as he remonstrated, **You foolish Galatians!** To embrace a doctrine which declared the death of Christ unnecessary was irrational (cf. 2:21). It would almost appear they had been **bewitched**, cast under some evil spell by a malign influence. For this they were, however, without excuse because the Savior had been **clearly portrayed** (*proographē*; lit., "to write for public reading" as with the posting of a public announcement) **as crucified** before them. Paul had vividly and graphically proclaimed the crucified Christ to the Galatians; yet their eyes had been diverted from the Cross to the Law. They were without excuse.

In order to demonstrate convincingly that faith alone is God's method of dealing, the apostle asked four questions.

3:2. (1) *How did you receive the Holy Spirit?* This rhetorical question pointed to the time of their conversions, when they received the Holy Spirit (cf. 4:6). Thus Paul did not question their salvation but challenged them to consider whether they were saved and received the Spirit by faith or on the basis of works. It was of course by faith, when they heard Paul preach the gospel. As an essentially Gentile church they did not possess the Mosaic Law anyway.

3:3. (2) *How will you be sanctified?* Presupposing the answer that the Galatians became Christians by faith, Paul asked if they were **so foolish** as to think they could begin the Christian life in one way (by faith) and move on to spiritual maturity in another (by works). This was what the Judaizers promoted (cf. 4:10; 5:2; 6:13), but the means of justification and sanctification were (and are) the same. There was no provision under the Law for the Holy Spirit to do a work of sanctification. The Galatian believers probably thought that keeping the old Law would aid them in their spiritual lives, but it would not.

3:4. (3) *Did you suffer in vain?* The third question looked back on the persecution the apostles and new believers experienced in the region of Galatia. As Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps at the end of the first missionary journey, they warned the Galatian converts that they would suffer as Christians (Acts 14:21–22). Persecution evidently soon followed, and Paul reminded them that if they turned from grace to Law they would brand their former position in error and would then have **suffered so much for nothing**. But the apostle was unwilling to believe that this was so.

3:5. (4) *On what basis did God perform miracles?* That **miracles** were performed among the Galatians by divine power was recorded in the Book of Acts (14:3, 8–11). It was clear, furthermore, that these supernatural works were not the result of the works of **the Law** but from the hearing that leads to faith. The Galatians did not know the Law, and Paul's message was that of justification by faith.

DAY 2

2. BY THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM (3:6–9).

3:6. The Judaizers claimed to have the Old Testament on their side, especially looking to Moses as their teacher. But Paul went centuries farther back and said, **Consider Abraham**. How was he, the father of Jewish people, justified? The answer was simple and direct. Noting Genesis 15:6, Paul declared, **He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness**. Abraham's faith in God's ability to perform what He promised was accepted by God as righteousness and so the patriarch was justified—before he was circumcised (cf. Gen. 17:24). How then could the Judaizers insist that circumcision was essential to being accepted by God?

3:7–8. Striking a tremendous blow at the Judaizers, Paul linked the past with the present and declared that just as **Abraham** was saved **by faith** so were those who now claimed to be his **children** (*huioi*; lit., “sons”). Abraham and his spiritual descendants, both Jews and Gentiles, have all been declared righteous by faith. Moreover, this conclusion is in harmony with **the Scripture** which states that **all nations will be blessed through Abraham** (cf. Gen. 12:3). Thus the justification of uncircumcised Gentiles was anticipated in the universal aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant when God **announced the gospel** (lit., “the good news”) **... to Abraham**. It should not be overlooked that Paul referred to Scripture speaking as though God were speaking, so it can rightly be affirmed that what the Bible says, God says. This and similar verses (e.g., John 10:35b; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21) provide important support for believing in the absolute and total inspiration and authority of Scripture.

3:9. The apostle concluded this phase of his argument by stating that though provision was made for “all nations” (v. 8), only **those who have faith** receive the blessing of justification. Thus Paul drew a distinction between God's provision and human appropriation.

DAY 3

3. BY THE EFFECT OF THE LAW (3:10–12). HAVING ESTABLISHED THE FACT THAT JUSTIFICATION IS BY FAITH FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF THE GALATIANS AND OF ABRAHAM, PAUL THEN SHOWED THE ILLOGIC OF RELIANCE ON THE LAW.

3:10–11. Contrary to what the Judaizers taught, the Law could not justify; it could only condemn. Paul quoted Deuteronomy 27:26 to show that **the Law** demanded perfection and that **a curse** was attached to failure to keep any part of it. The breaking of only one command even once brings a person under the curse; and since everybody fails at some point, all are under the curse. The proposition that a person can gain divine acceptance by human effort is therefore totally destroyed. Quoting the Old Testament again, Paul showed that even during the dispensation of **Law** legal obedience was not the basis for a **justified** standing **before God ... because**, as the Prophet Habakkuk wrote, **The righteous will live by faith** (Hab. 2:4).

3:12. But perhaps **faith** and **the Law** could be combined; perhaps both are needed. Quoting again from the Old Testament Paul proved this to be scripturally impossible. Law and faith are mutually exclusive. The basic principle of the Law is found in Leviticus 18:5: **The man who does these things will live by them**. Only perfect performance could win divine approval under the Law, but since that was not achievable the Law could only condemn a person (cf. James 2:10) and cause him to cast himself on God in faith.

4. BY THE WORK OF CHRIST (3:13–14).

3:13. The positive side of Paul's argument emphasized that there is hope for all who have broken the Law and are therefore under its curse. That hope is not in man but in **Christ** who **redeemed us from the curse of the Law**. But how did Christ redeem (*exēgorasen*, lit., “buy out of slavery”; cf. 4:5; see chart “New Testament Words for Redemption” at Mark 10:45) man? The answer is **by becoming a curse for us**. This is a strong declaration of substitutionary redemption whereby Christ took the penalty of all guilty lawbreakers on Himself. Thus the “curse of the Law” was transferred from sinners to Christ, the sinless One (cf. 1 Peter 3:18), and He delivered people from it. The confirming quotation from Deuteronomy 21:23 refers to the fact that in Old

Testament times criminals were executed (normally by stoning) and then displayed on a stake or post to show God's divine rejection. When Christ was crucified, it was evidence He had come under the curse of God. The manner of His death was a great obstacle to faith for Jews until they realized the curse He bore was for them (cf. Isa. 53).

DAY 4

3:14. Two purposes for Christ's redemptive work are given, each introduced by the Greek conjunction *hina*, "in order that" (cf. 4:5): (1) **Gentiles** might receive **the blessing given to Abraham**; as already stated (3:8) this is a reference not to personal or national blessings but to the promised blessing of justification apart from works of the Law, available to all who believe; (2) all who thus believe **might receive the promise of the Spirit**, that is, the Holy Spirit, who was promised (cf. v. 2). Again the apostle emphasized that salvation and sanctification come **by faith**, not by works.

5. BY THE PERMANENCE OF FAITH (3:15–18).

3:15–16. Even if Paul's opponents admitted that Abraham was justified by faith, those Judaizers might have argued that the Law, coming at a later time, entirely changed the basis for achieving salvation. To refute this, Paul declared that just as a properly executed Roman **covenant** (or will) cannot arbitrarily be **set aside** or changed (probably reference to ancient Gr. law), so the promises of God are immutable. Further, **the promises ... spoken to Abraham and to his seed** were not fulfilled before the giving of the Law. Rather, they found fulfillment in Christ and are in effect forever. The blessing of justification by faith is therefore permanent and could not be changed by the Law. The stress on **seed** (cf. Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7), not **seeds**, was made simply to remind the readers that the faithful in Israel had always recognized that blessing would ultimately come through a single individual, the Messiah (cf. Gal. 3:19). And Matthew declared Christ to be *the* Son of Abraham and the true Heir to the First Covenant's promises (Matt. 1:1).

3:17–18. Finally, Paul applied the principle of the permanence of faith by affirming that a covenant made so long before could not possibly be altered by a later giving of the Law. **The Law** was given **430 years** after the promise. When did that lengthy period of time begin? Some have suggested it began with Abraham, in which case the 430 years included the Israelites' time of about 200 years in Canaan and about 200 years in Egypt. The Septuagint supports this view, but this conflicts with the clear statement in Exodus 12:40 that the Egyptian sojourn was 430 years. Another suggestion is that the period began with the confirming of the Abrahamic Covenant with Jacob (Gen. 35:9–12).

A third and perhaps best view is that the period began with the final confirmation of the covenant to Jacob (given in Gen. 46:1–4). Accordingly the 430 years went from the end of one era (the Age of Promise) to the beginning of another (the Age of Law). This seems to fit best with Exodus 12:40. (Gen. 15:13 and Acts 7:6, in referring to the sojourn in Egypt as 400 years, may be using rounded figures.)

During that long interval God blessed the patriarchs on the basis of faith alone, and the coming of the Law could not change this in any way. Additionally **the Law** could not alter God's dealing with **Abraham** on the basis of **a promise** because the two are fundamentally different in nature. They do not co-mingle; they cannot be combined. Instead, **the inheritance** (i.e., justification by faith) was given by **God** as an unconditional gift to those who believe. Contrary to the claim of the Judaizers, obedience to the Law was not necessary to gain the inheritance. God's way of salvation has always been by grace through faith.

DAY 5

6. BY THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW (3:19–25).

3:19. An indignant Judaizer was sure to respond with objections to Paul's insistence that the Law could not give the Holy Spirit (vv. 1–5); could not bring justification (vv. 6–9); could not alter the permanence of faith (vv. 15–18); but does bring a curse (vv. 10–12). **What, then, was the purpose of the Law?** Why *was* a change made at Sinai? Paul answered by declaring the purpose and character of the Law. First, it was given **because of**

transgressions, that is, the Law was given to be a means for checking sins. It served as a restrainer of sins by showing them to be transgressions of God's Law which would incur His wrath (cf. 1 Tim. 1:8–11). Second, the Law was temporary and served **until the Seed** (the Messiah; cf. Gal. 3:16) came, after which it was no longer needed. Third, the Law was inferior because of the manner of its bestowal. While God made promises to Abraham directly, **the Law** was established **by a mediator**. There were in fact two mediators, the **angels** representing God, and Moses representing the people.

3:20. This verse appears to be closely related to the last part of verse 19. **A mediator** implies a covenant between two parties both of whom have responsibilities, facts true of the Mosaic Covenant. On the other hand **God is One**, that is, the “promise” (v. 19) was unilateral and was given to man directly without a mediator, God alone having responsibility for fulfilling it.

3:21–22. Another question was raised: Is there conflict between **the Law** and the **promises of God**? “Perish the thought” (*mē genoito*), declared the apostle. God gave both the Law and promises, but for different purposes. And it was not the purpose of **the Law** to give **life**. Theoretically salvation could have come by the Law if people had been capable of keeping it perfectly, but they could not (Rom. 8:3–4). The **life** promised to those who sought to obey the **Law** refers to temporal blessing on earth (Deut. 8:1).

But if the Law is not **opposed to** the promises, if there is no conflict between them, how can their harmony be demonstrated? By recognizing that while the Law could not justify or give life, it did prepare the way for the gospel. What part then did Law play in this respect? It declared **the whole world ... a prisoner of sin**. Referring perhaps to Psalm 143:1–2 or Deuteronomy 27:26, Paul declared that the whole world is trapped and under the dominion of sin (cf. Rom. 3:9, 23). When people recognize this and give up attempts to please God by their own works, the way is prepared for them to receive the promise of salvation **through faith in Jesus Christ**.

DAY 6

3:23–25. Continuing to comment on the purpose of the Law, Paul used two figures of speech, likening the Law to a prison and to a child-custodian relationship. **Before this faith came** means before the advent of faith in Jesus Christ (see v. 22). Justifying faith was operative in the Old Testament but faith in the person and work of Christ did not come until He was revealed. Before that, Israel was under the protective custody of **the Law**, God thus shielding His people from the evil heathen rites surrounding them. Further, the Law served as a “tutor” (NASB). The word *paidagōgos* is difficult to render into English since there is no exact parallel to this position in modern society. Phillips suggests “a strict governess.” The pedagogue here was not a “schoolmaster” (KJV) but a slave to whom a son was committed from age six or seven to puberty. These slaves were severe disciplinarians and were charged with guarding the children from the evils of society and giving them moral training. This was like the Law's function until **Christ** came and people could **be justified by faith** in Him. It is better then to understand that the Law did not *lead us to* Christ but that it was the disciplinarian *until* Christ came. Thus the reign of Law has ended for faith in Christ has delivered believers from the protective custody of the prison and the harsh discipline of the pedagogue.

7. BY THE BELIEVER'S PRESENT POSITION (3:26–29)

Paul's vindication of the doctrine of justification by faith reached a climax in this section as he contrasted the position of a justified sinner with what he had been under the Law. Three changes are noted.

3:26–27. First, **all** who believe in **Christ** become **sons of God**. The change in person from the first to the second (**you**) indicates that Paul turned from looking at Israel as a nation to address the Galatian believers. Under the dispensation of Law, as seen in verse 24, the Law was a discipling pedagogue, and those under its

supervision were regarded as children. However, now that Christ had come, the Galatian believers were adult sons **through faith** and were no longer under a Jewish slave-guardian. Why should they seek to revert to their inferior status? The exalted position of “sons of God” is explained in verse 27 to involve a living union with Christ brought about by being **baptized into Christ**. This is the baptism of (or in) the Holy Spirit, which according to Paul (1 Cor. 12:12–13) joins all believers to Christ and unites them within the church, Christ’s body. This union with Him means being **clothed with Christ**. In the Roman society when a youth came of age he was given a special toga which admitted him to the full rights of the family and state and indicated he was a grown-up son. So the Galatian believers had laid aside the old garments of the Law and had put on Christ’s robe of righteousness which grants full acceptance before God. Who would want to don again the old clothing?

DAY 7

3:28. Second, believers **are all one in Christ Jesus**. Since all believers became one with each other, human distinctions lose their significance. None is spiritually superior over another, that is, a believing Jew is not more privileged before God than a believing Gentile (**Greek**, in contrast to **Jew**, suggests all Gentiles; cf. Col. 3:11); a believing **slave** does not rank higher than a believing **free** person; a believing man is not superior to a believing woman. Some Jewish men prayed, “I thank God that Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.” Paul cut across these distinctions and stated that they do not exist in the body of Christ so far as spiritual privilege and position are concerned. Elsewhere, while affirming the coequality of man and woman in Christ, Paul did nonetheless make it clear that there is a headship of the man over the woman (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3) and that there are distinctions in the area of spiritual service (cf. 1 Tim. 2:12).

3:29. Third, believers in Christ **are Abraham’s seed**. As Paul previously stated, **Christ** is *the* Seed of Abraham (vv. 16, 19); therefore being in Christ makes a believer a part of that seed and an **heir of the promise** to Abraham. Any discussion of the seed of Abraham must first take into account his natural seed, the descendants of Jacob in the 12 tribes. Within this natural seed there is a believing remnant of Jews who will one day inherit the Abrahamic promises directed specifically to them (cf. Rom. 9:6, 8). But there is also the spiritual seed of Abraham who are not Jews. These are the Gentiles who believe and become Abraham’s spiritual seed. They inherit the promise of justification by faith as Paul explained earlier (cf. Gal. 3:6–9). To suggest, as amillenarians do, that Gentile believers inherit the national promises given to the believing Jewish remnant—that the church thus supplants Israel or is the “new Israel”—is to read into these verses what is not there.¹

¹ Donald K. Campbell, “Galatians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 596–600.