

Galatians 3:15-29, a Dialogue

by John M. Frame

There's a lot of good teaching in this text, but it's hard to communicate it to people. As theologians, we're sorely tempted to get into a lot of fairly technical language. But let me try to get away from that a bit by means of an imaginative construction, if you will indulge me.

Say that you are a Greek living in the first century (I'll call you Jason), and you hear a preacher named Paul speaking about somebody named Jesus. This Jesus, he says, worked miracles, died as a sacrifice, and rose again. And Paul says that if you believe in Jesus, God will forgive *all* your sins, every one of them. Something grips your heart, and you run up to Paul: "Yes, I am a sinner. I've often offended God. I desperately need forgiveness. I need Jesus." Paul instructs you a bit more, then brings you to some other men who give you the water of baptism. What now? Paul says, "Come to our worship meeting on the first day of the week."

So you go. Paul isn't there, but you see a number of people in odd oriental garb. Someone tells you they are Jews — Paul's countrymen. They seem to know much more than you do about the holy books. One takes you aside, "You are Greek, yes?"

"Yes."

"Welcome. I am Judah Ben Mosheh. We are so happy that God has been bringing Greeks to worship Jesus with us."

"Oh, yes," you reply. "God is so good! He brought me out of bondage to idols. Now I know the true God, and his Son Jesus Christ."

"Of course you do. Have you been circumcised?"

"Uh, well... well, what does that have to do with anything?"

"Don't you know what circumcision is?"

"Well, yes, I do... but what does that have to do with believing in Jesus?"

“If you believe in Jesus, you must keep God’s Law. God commanded us to be circumcised.”

“And if I am not circumcised, then what?”

“God’s wrath will be upon you. His blessing is only for those who obey the Law.”

“But I thought God forgave my sins when I believed in Jesus.”

“Yes, of course; God forgives the repentant. But after repentance we must obey the Law.”

“I must, then, be circumcised.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Anything else?”

“Oh, yes; you must change your diet, wear special clothing, go to three festivals a year, undergo ritual cleansing from defilement, keep all the traditions of the elders...”

“You mean I must become a Jew.”

“You must obey the Law that was given us by Moses.”

I have abbreviated the conversation. You and Ben Mosheh speak of many things, of Abraham, of Moses, of the Law and the covenants. It is all quite fascinating. But you leave the service rather disturbed. You had expected to find happy fellowship with others who knew Jesus. You had thought that it was enough to trust Christ. But Mr. Ben Mosheh laid some heavy burdens on you. You almost feel as though God hadn’t forgiven your sins at all. With all you now have to do, you wonder if God will ever love you.

Then you see Paul again, walking down the road, and you run to meet him. “Paul, Paul!” He greets you warmly. “Jason! Did you enjoy the service? I had to worship in another part of town.”

“Oh yes,” you reply. “It was wonderful to worship Jesus. But I do not understand your Jewish friends. They are telling me I must be circumcised.”

“Oh, yes,” says Paul. “Ben Mosheh and his friends have been talking to you. I am so angry about the way they are misleading our Gentile believers. I will have to speak to them very pointedly.”

“But, Paul: didn’t God command his people to be circumcised?”

“He commanded the Jews to be circumcised; not everyone.”

“I don’t understand, Paul.”

“If you read the first chapters of Genesis, my friend, you see that God is concerned there with the whole world. He created the whole world. When man sinned, he brought a curse on the whole world. Later, he destroyed the whole world by a flood, except for Noah and his family. *Then* he called one family, the family of Abraham, separating them from all the other families of the world. But even then, he was concerned for the whole world. God’s promise to Abraham was that ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ Isn’t that wonderful? From the beginning, God intended to save not only Jews, but also Greeks.”

“But Mr. Ben Mosheh told me that God commanded even Abraham to be circumcised.”

“God commanded that *after* Abraham believed God’s promise. He believed, and God looked on him as righteous. *Then* God gave him the sign of circumcision. So God saved Abraham when he was uncircumcised, when he was like a Greek, when he was like you.”

“But Abraham had to be circumcised. Why not us Greeks?”

“Because God promised salvation to Abraham *before* he commanded circumcision. Do you think that God takes back his promises?”

“Certainly not.”

“And the rest of the Law of Moses came 430 years later. Do you think that law cancels out the promise?”

“That cannot be.”

“Then you are saved just as Abraham was, by believing God’s promise.”

“But Mr. Ben Mosheh was telling me how glorious the Law was, given by angels, through Moses the mediator. How solemn and wonderful! What a day that must have been, when Israel saw the angels and promised Moses they would keep the Law.”

“But Jason, think now: God’s promise to Abraham came, not with angels, not with a mediator, just God, in stark simplicity. God didn’t ask Abraham to promise anything. Jason, imagine God himself coming to you all by himself and making you a promise, just him and you. He asks nothing of you, just gives you something wonderful, beyond anything you can imagine. Is that any less glorious than the giving of the Law?”

“Yes, how wonderful that is! Just the living God, making a promise to me!”

“So now you know that you belong to him. You are his, and he is yours.”

“Oh, what a relief! That’s what I thought at first, when I first heard you preaching Jesus. But I was worried that I would have to obey the whole Law of Moses before God would accept me.”

“Not at all. With God a promise is a promise.”

“But how can God forgive me, just like that?”

“You believed in Jesus, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You believe that he died for your sins, right?”

“Right. “

“Then that’s how God can forgive you, just like that! Jesus is Abraham’s son, his seed. Those promises about God blessing Abraham’s seed? Those refer to Jesus! If you believe in Jesus, you share in all the blessings God promised to Abraham.”

“But then why did God give the Law to the Jews?”

“Well, for some reason, God decided not to send Jesus immediately. There was a long period of preparation between the time of Abraham and the time of Jesus. Israel was the nation into which Jesus was born. It had to be a special

nation, given a lot of special laws, disciplined severely for its sins. The Law was like a slave-driver, to keep the people in line until Jesus could come to set them free.”

“It seems that Ben Mosheh is still under bondage. He doesn’t know that the time of the Law is finished.”

“I shall have to tell him. Perhaps he will hear me and rejoice. Or maybe he will be too proud. It’s hard for people like him. He’s grown up, hearing on every side, ‘Keep the law, keep the law; do this, do that.’ He believes in Jesus, but he doesn’t understand the wonderful freedom Christ brings us. The good news calls him to a whole different way of life. But he’s a creature of habit, and a creature of tradition. He’s so much in bondage to his way of life that sometimes he doesn’t really hear the Word of God.”

“Does he need to become a Greek?”

“No, no more than you have to become a Jew, or a free man needs to become a slave, or a woman needs to become a man. We are all one in Christ. In baptism, we all ‘put on Christ,’ as someone puts on a robe. The way it should be in the church is that we don’t wear our Judaism or our Greekness on the outside, but we put Christ over them, so people can see only him. Ben Mosheh is wearing his Jewish robes over Jesus, instead of the other way around.

“And he needs to open his heart,” Paul continues. “He wants to impose his traditions on you, or else shut you out of God’s kingdom. But Jesus wants us to welcome the Greeks, to welcome people from every race and culture.”

“Thank you so much, Paul. Now I do feel welcome again! God chose me to belong to Jesus — me, a Greek! We can have Greek churches now, with Greek liturgy, and Greek customs. And if Jews come to our services, they’ll just have to become like us! They’ll have to do everything the way we do.”

“Now, now,” says Paul. “Leave the vengeance to God.”

“Okay. But if any Romans or Spaniards come to my church, they will have to learn the Greek traditions.”

“Come on, Jason, my friend. Get serious. We all worship together, as members of one another. Our salvation comes through Abraham’s promise, in Christ. Nobody imposes his traditions on anybody. It’s God’s promise that counts. And if we love him, we will love and welcome everybody that Jesus died to save,

for we are all one in him. We won't be trying to get everybody to do things our way, or to lay heavy burdens on one another's shoulders. How wonderful it is to be saved by God's promise in Christ. That changes everything, doesn't it?"

"Yes; that changes everything."