

# When the Fullness of Time Had Come: Paul's Gospel to the Galatians

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## Introduction

This paper is organized as a “mini-commentary” on Paul’s letter to the Galatians. My main goal is to correct what I believe is a common Protestant misunderstanding regarding the main topic that Paul addressed as well as the purpose and meaning of the arguments that he made.

As far as I can tell, much of modern, orthodox Protestantism sees Galatians as an argument against “legalism.” Legalism is the idea that one can earn or merit salvation from God either in part or in whole. The legalist thinks that our works can contribute in some causative way to our salvation. The common Protestant view is that Paul wrote Galatians to combat this very error. On this view, some Jewish Christians were teaching the gentile Galatians that they needed to perform good works so as to merit salvation. Justification refers to a right judicial standing before God, and these Jewish Christians were teaching that one is justified -- one receives this right standing -- by doing good works. Paul argued against this idea by showing that one receives a right judicial standing before God solely by faith in Jesus. Thus, the commonly perceived topic of the letter was the “mechanics” of an individual’s justification (and salvation) -- how a sinful individual can “get [judicially] right with God.” And Paul’s arguments were designed to show that the correct answer is “by faith alone in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.”

I believe this view of the topic as well as of Paul’s arguments is incorrect, and this paper is designed to contrast this misunderstanding with what I believe is a proper understanding of Galatians. Along these lines, I believe Paul’s letter can be summarized as follows. The topic of Galatians is not the mechanics of how an individual is saved from his sins. Rather, it is the Messiah’s fulfillment and transformation of the old covenants. Paul’s Jewish Christian opponents were teaching that the Advent of the Messiah did not significantly alter the form of the covenants. Thus, gentiles who wanted to be in a saving, covenantal relationship to God still needed to do what the Jews had always needed to do: get circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law. This was not a call to legalism, but it was a call to be faithful to the old covenants as if those covenants had not been affected by Jesus’ Advent. Paul responded by showing that Jesus had in fact fulfilled the promise to Abraham so that the old order was transformed. Jesus is the true heir to the Abrahamic covenant and because of His fulfillment and transformation of the old covenants, people acquire a saving, covenantal relationship with God through the Messiah apart from the old covenants. Thus, the theological categories of “Jew” and “Greek” no longer exist. Jesus fulfilled the old covenant promises and He thereby transformed the old order into a new creation -- a new covenant where all of God’s people have equal status and standing before God.

None of this is meant to deny what orthodox Protestants want to affirm through their understanding of Galatians. I believe that the Bible does teach that all men are sinners and that men can not do anything to merit salvation in any way. The only thing that men can merit from God is condemnation. Thus, the only way that an individual can have a right judicial standing before God is by trusting that Jesus is the promised Messiah who bore his sins on the cross and who was raised to life as the King of the universe. The traditional Protestant view of the mechanics of individual salvation is true enough, but what I argue below is that this is not the subject under discussion in Galatians. And while Galatians may well have implications that touch on this subject, the actual topic of the letter is the fulfillment of the old covenant promises and the subsequent transformation of the old covenants into the new covenant via Jesus.

## What Was at Stake: The Gospel

After a brief introduction, Paul chastised the Galatians because the gospel was at stake. Jewish Christians from Jerusalem were turning the people to another gospel (1:6-9), and Peter, by separating from the gentiles during table fellowship, was also perverting the gospel (2:14). Traditionally, this has been seen as an attempt on the part of the Jewish Christians to teach some form of salvation by works. But the issue Paul addressed was not (at least directly) about legalism because, as I’ve previously shown, the gospel is not about the “mechanics” of an individual’s salvation. Rather, the gospel is the proclamation that:

the promised new age and kingdom of God has arrived, because Jesus is the Messiah-God who has come to reign as King over all by conquering the enemy (sin and death) via resurrection, redeeming His covenanted people, and bringing the fullness of the covenant to the nations.” (see my short paper [“The Gospel: The Return of the King”](#))

And again, I previously expanded on the last clause as such:

A significant reason for the King's return was to incorporate the nations into covenant relationship with God, and Paul discussed this with regularity. So Paul's 'gospel' is 'according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest' (Rom. 16:25, 26). It is called 'the mystery of the gospel' (Eph. 6:19). It is 'this mystery among the gentiles: which is Christ in you' (Col. 1:27). Thus, a central part of the gospel is that Jesus has brought salvation to the gentiles by incorporating them into the covenant -- into Himself (Col. 1:21-27; Eph. 3:1-6). (from the same paper)

The gospel describes God's eschatological fulfillment of promises that He made during the old covenantal order. The King would come back to judge the old order and create a new heavens and earth wherein He would redeem His people and open up the blessings of this new age to the world. This is the gospel, and one does not pervert it by teaching some form of legalism. To be sure, legalism is a deadly perversion of biblical truth. But perverting the gospel requires a different error because the gospel is not a description of how an individual is justified in God's sight. It is certainly important for Christians to understand that their personal salvation is entirely a gracious gift from God and cannot be earned/merited in any way. But this point is really an effect or application of the gospel. It follows from the historical truths that make up the gospel, but it is not itself the gospel. As I mentioned in the introduction, the Jewish Christians were perverting the gospel because they were fundamentally denying the shape and content of the promised new age. Their view of the Messiah probably did not extend much further than political deliverance, so they taught that the old covenants were still in force and still looked like they had always looked. But they also required the gentiles to enter this old covenantal order to be saved, and this was something that the old order itself did not even require. I'll say more about this later.

We should also see that by separating from table fellowship with the gentiles, Peter was hardly saying that justification comes by way of meritorious works. There is no necessary connection between one's view of whether or not works merit salvation and one's view of the covenantal status of the Galatian gentiles. It is simply a non sequitur to try to link Peter's specific behavior with the teaching of works righteousness. But there was a strong connection between Peter's actions and the gospel. Biblically, table fellowship is *koinonia* -- communion of the saints. By refusing such communion with gentiles, Peter's actions announced that gentiles qua gentiles were not really in covenant with the Church and with Christ. He was therefore actively denying that God had created one new man from the two old men (cf. Eph. 2:11-19) in the Messiah. He was denying that Christ had come to fulfill the old covenants and to incorporate the gentiles into Himself apart from them becoming Jews. This is how Peter perverted the gospel. Additionally, we should note that the gospel was historically rather new. It was promised long ago, but its fulfillment was rather new. On the other hand, legalism was wrong under the old covenants long before the arrival of "the gospel of the kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14, 15). Legalism would not therefore have been a violation of the gospel. It would have been a violation of basic soteriological facts that were much older.

Thus, the gospel is the proclamation of the historical fact that Jesus has fulfilled the old covenants. He has returned as King to rescue His people and bring the gentiles into His new covenant age. This fulfillment was being denied in Galatia, and Paul's letter to the Galatians addressed this denial.

## **The Judaizers**

The Jewish Christians who were perverting the gospel have traditionally been referred to as the "Judaizers" because they tried to convince the Galatian gentiles that they needed to become Jews in order to be saved. Paul first described them as "false brethren" who "came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage" (2:4). Luke provided a good description of what they were teaching. "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'... And when [Paul and Barnabas and others] had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise [the gentile Christians], and to command them to keep the law of Moses.'" (Acts 15:1, 4, 5). The Judaizers were trying to foist the works of the law on the gentiles, and they claimed that salvation was at stake. But this does not imply what we often think it implies. For if we think this proves that the Judaizers were teaching works-righteousness, we actually relegate the whole OT to legalism. For under the old covenant, it was in fact necessary for Jews to be circumcised and keep Torah.

"Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." (Gen. 17:14)

"However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you..." (Deut. 28:15)

"See I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord

you God, to walk in his ways... then you will live and increase... But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient... I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.” (Deut. 30:15-18)

Thus, the Judaizers’ position hardly required legalism. They were simply requiring what God had required: faithfulness to the covenant. This had nothing to do with legalism unless we want to charge the OT with legalism. But God’s people have never merited anything. They have never been saved because of their works. On the other hand, a son does have a moral obligation to obey his father. If he rejects this obligation, he is a rebel who will eventually be cast out of the household. In other words, we need to avoid the massive but common non sequitur of conflating moral obligation and punishment for failure to obey on the one hand with the concept of merit on the other hand. The two are not the same, and the former does not entail the latter.

God required obedience from his people under the old covenant, and He also requires obedience of His people under the new covenant.

“But why do you call me ‘Lord Lord’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46)

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34, 35)

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.... If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” (John 15:5, 6, 10)

“Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name...” (Rom. 1:5)

“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you... that a man has his father’s wife!... In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.... But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person.” (I Cor. 5:1, 4, 5, 11 cf. Matt. 18:15-18)

“... it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (II Thess. 1:6-8).

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent.” (Rev. 2:5).

Dozens of other references could be given. God has always required faithfulness from His people, and those who are rebellious are cut off from the covenant (either during their lives or at their deaths). But it would be fallacious to think that this entails legalism. Necessity and merit are different things altogether. The traditional Protestant description of the doctrine of sola fide (“Justification is by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone”) recognizes this well. Works/faithfulness are necessary for salvation, but this says nothing about why they are necessary. They are necessary but not meritorious (e.g., necessary as an effect but not as a cause). Thus, the statements in Acts 15 regarding the Judaizers indicate that while they did see circumcision/Torah as necessary, nothing legalistic is recorded of them. They were simply requiring what God had required.

But apart from legalism, there was a major problem with what the Judaizers were advocating. Actually, there were two. Let me reiterate what I just said with some added emphases. They were simply requiring what God had in the past required of the Jews. The first problem was discussed in detail by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. This view denies the Messiah’s fulfillment of the old covenants and treats those covenants as if they were permanent in their original form. This problem will be discussed throughout this paper. The second problem can be seen when we note that gentiles could be saved in the OT apart from circumcision and the ceremonial ordinances. The covenants were for the Jews as a special, priestly people. So while gentiles could get circumcised if they wanted that special relationship, they were not required to do so. There were “God-fearing” gentiles who chose not to be circumcised during the OT and they were saved just as well. So the gentiles have never been required to become Jews in order to be saved.

Thus, the Judaizers taught serious error not only about the transformation of the old covenants but also about those covenants themselves apart from the question of fulfillment and transformation. They (1) required the gentiles to become Jews by entering the old covenants and they (2) failed to acknowledge that those covenants

themselves had been fulfilled and transformed by the new covenant in the Messiah. This, not legalism, was their perversion of the gospel.

### **Introducing the Question of the Gentiles' Status**

Paul's first argument regarding the main topic of the letter (2:11ff) was with Peter's specific practice, not with Judaizing theory (i.e., "I said to Peter before all..."). Notice again what the immediate problem was: Peter was separating himself from table fellowship with the gentiles. Paul pointed to this behavior and then began to show why it was such a large problem. Therefore, Paul's argument must, in the nature of the case, refute this behavior. As such, the immediate problem can be seen to be one of ecclesiology, not soteriology (at least not the unmediated, individualistic way in which soteriology is often conceived of by us American Protestants). Arguing against legalism at this point would have been a significant diversion at best -- almost surely irrelevant. Someone could either be a legalist or not without committing himself to a particular view of whom to fellowship with. A non-legalistic, Christian Jew who thought that the old covenants were still in force and required the Jew-gentile separation could very easily have argued for separation from the uncircumcised gentiles. He would simply want to be faithful, perhaps even zealously so, to his understanding of the old covenants. Thus, Paul's argument needed to address the sociological/ecclesiological issue at hand: was it acceptable for Christian Jews to avoid fellowship with Christian gentiles? (And the questions that lie just behind this: who are God's people, how are they constituted, and what is the nature of the covenant after the Messiah's advent?) If he had refuted legalism but did not address this issue, he would not have shown that Peter's behavior was necessarily wrong.

Paul then turned to the Galatian gentiles (3:1) who were beginning to fall for the idea that they needed to become Jews in order to be in the new covenant. He then quickly shifted to more general points in order to refute the root problem: Judaizing theology. The conclusion to Paul's arguments was that the gentiles could not get circumcised, period. If they did, Christ would not profit them (5:1-4). This works against the traditional Protestant reading. For if Paul had been arguing against a legalistic understanding of the old covenants, the matter could simply have been addressed by a correct understanding of circumcision. Paul's opposition could simply have said,

"OK, we agree that men can earn nothing from God. We agree that one should get circumcised for the same reason one loves his neighbor, avoids theft, etc. -- out of gratitude for God's unmerited gifts. We Jews follow God's law in the spirit of a child who loves his father and wants to obey him -- not to earn anything. This means that circumcision, like all other works, is simply evidence of gratitude. Thus, if the gentiles refuse to get circumcised and follow Torah, they will be demonstrating ingratitude and rebellion -- the picture of an unregenerate life. If someone claims to be a Christian but actively denies God's law in other areas (e.g., murder, adultery, theft) without acknowledging the need for change, he shows himself a hypocrite and a false professor. So it is with the rest of Torah (e.g., circumcision, dietary laws). The gentiles cannot consistently claim to be in covenant with God while flaunting and denying His law."

This would have been the end of the argument. The Judaizers would have agreed with Paul's rebuke of legalism and would still have been able to argue that the gentiles needed to be circumcised and fully keep Torah. But Paul's actual argument did not allow for this possibility. He did not say that circumcision was fine and commendable as long as it was done with the right attitude/motivation and with the correct understanding of the relationship between works and grace. Attitude was not the problem; circumcision itself was the problem because its "expiration date" had come and gone. Paul did not simply rescue the old covenants from a perverse interpretation of how they functioned. He argued against the old covenants themselves. Or rather, he argued against the idea that those covenants could be permanent and could operate without change after the Messiah had come. Thus, the root problem behind Peter's behavior was a reemerging separation theology which divided Jew and gentile and which required gentiles to become Jews (2:14, "live as Jews") in order to enter God's covenant. In other words, the issues were the flow of redemptive history, the transformation of the covenants, and the fulfillment of promises (objective points), not the proper subjective attitude toward the "currently functioning" covenant.

### **The Fulfillment of the Promise: The Overall Argument**

The Judaizers were trying to get the gentiles to "live as Jews." Thus, they made the effort in the first place to get them circumcised and then to obey Torah. The position is simple enough to understand. In order to be a redeemed son of God, one had to become a son of Abraham -- a Jew. The flow of Paul's initial response (3:5-29) is as follows:

1. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. Through him, all nations would be blessed.
2. The law could not have been the means by which the promise was fulfilled because the Jews already had the law whereas the unfulfilled promise required faith that it would be fulfilled in the future.

3. This promise was focused on and came to fruition in the true seed of Abraham -- Jesus.
4. The law came after the promise. It therefore could not nullify the promise by being the real means of inheriting the Abrahamic blessing.
5. Because the law came after the promise and cannot annul it, the law was not meant to be a permanent part of the equation. It was actually a guardian and teaching aid that prepared the way for the Messiah to fulfill the promise. It was a temporary guardian-tutor for God's people, and now that the Messiah has come, the guardian is no longer necessary.
6. If you have been baptized into Christ because of faith in the promise that God made, you are in Christ.
7. If you are in Christ who is the promised seed of Abraham, then you are sons of Abraham (and of God) and heirs of the promise.
8. Therefore, there is no longer a distinction between Jew and Greek, for all are one in Christ.

This is one big redemptive-historical argument designed to show how circumcision (i.e., the Abrahamic covenant) and "the law" (i.e., the Mosaic covenant) had been fulfilled and transformed by the Messiah. The argument is fundamentally temporal -- comparing the pre-Advent covenantal structure with the post-Advent covenantal structure. This is in contrast to the debate over legalism -- a debate that is fundamentally a-temporal. Such a debate involves systematic, a-temporal categories and does not deal with how the covenant is transformed by the arrival of the Messiah.

### **The Fulfillment of the Promise: The Details of the Argument**

Paul began the argument by pointing out that Abraham's trust in God's promise was reckoned as righteousness (cf. Gen. 15:6). This, Paul claimed, was the way by which God would justify the gentiles. This blessing on the gentiles was, in fact, the gospel. "In you all the nations shall be blessed." (3:8 cf. Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18) Though Paul did not emphasize the point, we should be able to see that Abraham's faith came before He was circumcised. If we can mimic the point that Paul made explicit regarding the Mosaic Law (3:15-18), we can say that because circumcision came after the promise had been given and after Abraham's faith had been reckoned as righteousness, it was not intrinsic to being "sons of Abraham" (3:7). Even Abraham himself did not need it in order to be a faithful follower -- a disciple -- of God. (Paul actually did make this argument with respect to circumcision in his letter to the Roman Christians, cf. Rom. 4:9-12.)

Now we come to what is usually thought of as the heart of the traditional Protestant understanding of Galatians: the antithesis between law and faith (3:10-14). According to the traditional view, Paul was contrasting the attempt to merit a right standing before God based on human effort with the true right standing that comes only by way of faith in Jesus as the propitiation of our sins. According to this understanding, the Judaizers were legalists. They thought they could earn salvation by their works. But Paul refuted this notion. The law cannot bring salvation because although one must perfectly fulfill it in order to avoid being cursed by it, no one can be perfect. All men sin, so all men are under the curse of the law. This includes those who are "of the works of the law" -- those who try to earn salvation by keeping the law. They are definitely under the curse. Thus, salvation can only come (apart from the law) by faith in the salvation which the Messiah obtains on our behalf.

The refutation of this kind of legalism is true enough. All men are sinners, and the only thing that sinful man can earn from God is judgment. But is this what Paul was talking about in this specific passage? As we have seen so far, this description of the debate does not fit within the overall context of Paul's letter nor does it mesh with the redemptive-historical argument that Paul was making. Yet Paul's language seems so clear. What was the point of this passage?

Paul said, "As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse, for it is written, 'Cursed is every one who does not continue in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.'" (3:10) The traditional paradigm would say that those who are "of the works of the law" are all those who think they can earn salvation from God. But this does not work. We should note that Paul proved the point of the first part of the sentence by quoting Deut. 27:26. This curse applied to those who were "of the works of the law." It did not apply to those who were not of the works of the law. But if we think that those who are "of the works" are legalists while those who are not of the works of the law are those who hold to the doctrine of sola fide, we make the wrong distinction.

This curse was a covenant curse given to those within the Mosaic covenant who failed to be faithful to it. If they did not get circumcised, they would be cut off from the people. And if they did not follow the Mosaic commandments, they would be cursed (cf. the verses just quoted above: Deut. 28:15; 30:15-18). The book of Deuteronomy records the renewal of the Mosaic covenant. The potential curses of the covenant, of course, come

at the end. This is the context of Deut. 27:26, the verse Paul quoted. So the curse had reference to the Mosaic covenant made with the Jews.

Thus, this curse did not apply to gentiles outside of the covenant. It did not apply to pagans and it did not apply to the “God-fearing” gentiles either. As mentioned above, this latter category has never been required to follow all the commands of Moses. This means that the distinction provided by the phrase “of the works of the law” is not between legalists and non-legalists but between Jews under the old covenant and gentiles not under the old covenant. This curse did not apply to the most legalistic gentile in Egypt, and neither did it apply to the most orthodox, God-fearing gentile in Assyria after Jonah preached there. (Obviously if the curse applied to such gentiles, it would be impossible to be a God-fearing gentile without becoming a Jew and fully following Torah -- in which case the person would no longer be a gentile.) On the other hand, the curse was still relevant for the most consistent rejecter of legalism in Israel. It did not matter what such a person believed about the relationship of grace and faith to works. If he did not “continue in all things that are written,” he would have been liable to the curse.

Moreover, the requirement that the Jews “continue in all things that are written in the book of the law” was not a requirement that they be sinless. This was what God expected of His people, and there were many Jews who did in fact “continue in all things.” This sounds strange in light of the traditional Protestant description of one of the main purposes of the law. The law was supposed to show a person that despite his best efforts, he could not even come close to keeping the law. We all sin against the law with regularity. Therefore, the law was supposed to show us our sinfulness and our consequent need for a redeemer.

This purpose of the law is certainly legitimate and relevant for us today in many contexts, but this is not relevant to Paul’s argument here. Paul was not discussing generic, sinful man’s propensity to sin and subsequent need for substitutionary atonement. He was discussing the Jews’ relationship to the Mosaic covenant, and within this context, God did expect His people to obey the law. A good number of them did obey, and we can point to some examples. Though Noah came well before Moses, the Scriptures tell us that he was a just and blameless man who walked with God (Gen. 6:9). Simeon was righteous and devout (Luke 2:25), and John was a righteous and holy man (Mark 6:20). Zechariah and Elizabeth were “blameless” as they walked “in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord” (Luke 1:5, 6). Yet all of these people were sinners. How is this possible?

The answer is that a sinner could still walk in all the commandments of the Lord because the Mosaic Law itself had provisions to deal with sin. The law graciously provided a sacrificial system so that those sinners who desired to follow the Lord could have their sins dealt with. In that way, they were able to abide by the whole law while remaining sinners. This is what it meant for a Jew to be faithful to the Mosaic covenant. (Likewise, the new covenant has provisions to deal with sin so that Christians can be faithful followers of God even though they still sin. E.g., I John 1:8, 9) Thus, the curse threatened in Deut. 27:26 and quoted by Paul did not apply to someone simply because he had sinned. Instead, it fell upon Israel when she was rebellious and unrepentant. The covenantal curses were brought on her when she broke the covenant through unrepentant idolatry, perversion or neglect of the sacrificial system, or some similar behavior. It was not sin in the abstract that brought on the curses. The law itself proved atonement for sincere and faithful Jews (though we know that the sacrificial system was always temporary, incomplete, and typological -- cf. the book of Hebrews). Instead, the curses came because of apostasy -- unrepentant rebellion against God and His covenant.

Finally with respect to “the curse of the law,” we can note a significant eschatological element to Paul’s reference. Several times under the old administration, the curse had in fact fallen on unfaithful Israel. We should recall Shiloh (I Sam. 4), the Northern Kingdom (Hos. 4; II Kings 17), and the Southern Kingdom (Jer. 7; II Kings 25). And throughout the Gospels and Acts, what we find is that Israel had once again become unfaithful. Accordingly, new prophets had come (e.g., John, Jesus) to warn Israel that judgment would soon come upon her because of this (e.g., Matt. 3:1-12; 21:33-45; 23; 24). But Israel’s unfaithfulness only grew, and the ultimate example of such unfaithfulness was her rejection of the Messiah -- the one who had come to fulfill the old covenants and their promises. Thus, the curse of the law would soon be metered out again.

Those Jews who were faithful to the covenant would not be cursed and condemned. These faithful Jews were those who believed in Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises (3:22). He redeemed them from the curse of the law (3:13). On the other hand, the Judaizers would not acknowledge this and they were convincing gentiles of their error. Gentiles who accepted this error and became circumcised would have been debtors to keep the whole law (5:3). But true faithfulness to the law required one to see that Christ was the “end” -- the fulfilling purpose -- of the law (Rom. 10:4), and this was ironically the very thing that the unconverted Jews and Judaizers were denying. This is why the curse of the law would soon fall on Judea. Thus, straying gentiles would have been denying the proper fulfillment of the law in order to go to a law that would soon bring curses upon such unfaithfulness (Matt. 23:31-39; 24:34). Without the Lamb who fulfills the law and redeems from its curse, both Judaizers and straying gentiles would be cursed -- anathema (1:8, 9) -- by the law. They had attached themselves to the old covenant in a Christ-less manner by denying His fulfillment of it. By thus being unfaithful to the old covenant, they had fallen from grace (5:1-4) and many would soon reap its curses.

This is the same point made in the book of Hebrews. Those Jews who were tempted to go back to the old covenant, apart from the Messiah, had denied their sanctification and could only look forward to the judgment that would soon come (Heb. 10:18-29). In 70 A.D., God used Rome as He had previously used the Philistines, Assyrians, and Babylonians. The Roman armies invaded and flattened Israel and Jerusalem, and many unfaithful Jews were destroyed along with the old covenant ceremonial system. Galatian gentiles who did try to “convert” to the old covenant may or may not have suffered the physical punishment that came upon Judea, but the old world that they sought was destroyed. Faithful Jews and gentiles were resurrected into the new world, but straying gentiles would not have seen this resurrection. Whether they were judged in 70 A.D. (the historical “curse of the law”) or at their deaths (the eschatological “curse of the law”), their loss of Christ and fall from grace could only lead to the law’s curse for unfaithfulness.

Thus, Paul’s reference to the curse of the law and the Messianic redemption from it did not refer to salvation from sin in general for people in general. The curse of the law was the curse of the Mosaic covenant, and it threatened and came upon those who were in that covenant but unfaithful to it. Moreover, this reference by Paul had a particularly relevant historical bite for his gentile audience. The curse of the law was coming on that generation of unfaithful Jews, and any gentile attempt to leave what Christ had done in order to join those Jews in their perversion of the Mosaic covenant would meet with the same curse.

But if those who are “of the works of the law” are not legalists and the curse referred to by Paul did not relate to just any sin, what was the point of the strong dichotomy between the law and faith? Paul said that “the law is not of faith” (3:12). Then he said that Christ took the curse of the law upon Himself so that His people would receive the promise of the Spirit by faith. The law is not of faith, and nobody is justified by the law. Instead, the promise comes by faith. The point could not be more obvious, right?

The first thing to notice is that it would be untrue to say that the law was not of faith because it was “of merit.” Paul said that “the just shall live by faith” (3:11 quoting Hab. 2:4). He then said that the law was not of faith because “the man who does them shall live by them” (3:12). This is a quotation of Leviticus 18:5. “You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the Lord your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.” (Lev. 18:4, 5) Paul was manifestly not saying that while Christians in his time and the Jews in Habakkuk’s time were to hold to sola fide, the Jews in Moses’ time were to merit salvation by keeping the law. This makes no sense, if for no other reason, then the fact that the Jews in Habakkuk’s time were under the same Mosaic covenant that commanded them to live by the law. Moreover, this is not some blatant soteriological contradiction between Habakkuk’s time and Moses’ time or between Paul’s time and Moses’ time.

God commanded His people through Moses to live by His law. But His law has never been “of merit.” The substitutionary sacrificial system at the heart of the law made this plain. The Ten Commandments made it plain as well, for this general summary of the law was prefaced with a statement of unmerited grace. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Ex. 20:2) This is the context for the law. It was given as a standard for the people to live by after they had been graciously redeemed by God. This law was a gracious gift given to those who deserved the same judgment God executed on the Pagans in the Promised Land. “Therefore understand that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people.” (Deut. 9:6) The law was a gracious gift from God (Ps. 119:29), and the sacrificial system graciously provided substitutionary atonement for a sinful people. The Jews under the Mosaic covenant (including Habakkuk) were indeed supposed to live by God’s Torah (i.e., instruction, teaching, law), but this had nothing to do with legalism because the law has never been a means of meriting salvation. God’s law itself taught God’s people that they were to live by the law, and this is not in any way a legalistic command. God, of course, did not command legalism.

So what does it mean to say that the law was not of faith? I would suggest that the distinction was not between abstract, merit-earning works and abstract trust but between something the Jews already had and something they had to wait and trust for. The law was something that the Jews already had in their possession -- something that did not require trust in the future deliverance of a promised gift. The law was not of faith because God had already given it to them. “The man who does these things will live by them.” This does not require one to trust that God would fulfill a future promise to provide the law. They did not need to wait and trust that it would come. They already had it. So they could live with what they already had.

But there was something that, even according to the law itself, Israel did not yet have. God had promised it, but it had yet to come. Therefore, the Jews were to wait and trust that God would deliver what He had promised to deliver at some unspecified future point in time. The Jews had the law that did not require waiting and trusting, but they did not have the fulfilled promise given to Abraham. For this, one would have to trust (i.e., have faith) that God would be faithful and fulfill His promise.

Thus, there is a dichotomy in this passage between “the law” (i.e., the Mosaic covenant) and faith, but it is not a

contrast between meriting salvation by works and obtaining it by faith. It is a contrast between the law as a present but incomplete possession and a promise that, one must trust, God would fulfill at some point in the future. "Faith" in this passage is therefore eschatological -- it is trust that a promised gift would be given in the future. And according to Paul, Jesus was the fulfillment of that promise. He took the curse of the Mosaic covenant upon Himself in order to liberate the Jews from the threat of that curse and to bring "the blessing of Abraham" -- the promised gospel -- to the gentiles. As we will see below, this description of the law/faith dichotomy as well as the eschatological nature of faith fits in well with Paul's subsequent discussion of faith and the law.

So after Paul had explained that the promise did not inherently depend on the law, Paul went on to explain why the promised blessing (which Paul also called "the promise of the Spirit," v. 14, and "the inheritance," v. 18) did not hinge on the law (3:15-18). Now if Paul's opponents were legalists, he could have simply argued like this. "You cannot earn the promise of the Spirit by keeping the law because you cannot keep the law. You sin at every point, so it should be obvious that you cannot earn the promise by your sinful actions." But Paul's argument does not look like this at all. Instead, Paul made a temporal point about the law. It came after the covenant had been confirmed. And since we know that no one can annul or add to a man-made covenant after it has been confirmed, how much more would this apply to God's covenant? God gave the covenant to Abraham by way of promise before the existence of the law. Thus, the law -- the Mosaic covenant -- cannot legitimately be a replacement for the promise. It must have been for some other purpose. Moreover, the promised seed was actually the Messiah. The promise comes to fruition in Him and not through the law.

This would raise an obvious question. What, then, was the point of the law? (3:19) If the gospel preached to Abraham came before the law and if it was to be fulfilled in the Messiah apart from the law, then what was the point of the Mosaic covenant? Paul said it was "added because of transgression." A little later, he said the law was a tutor. "But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, confined for the faith that would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." (3:23-25) Once again, we see the fundamentally redemptive-historical nature of Paul's argument. This argument is focused on the transformation of the covenant because of the advent of the Messiah. Paul simply was not discussing systematic, a-temporal questions such as "can one earn salvation by doing good works?"

It is important in this regard to notice that those who were "kept under guard by the law" were the OT Jews. We saw previously that it was the Jews who were "of the works of the law." This phrase did not describe the Galatian gentiles, generic unbelievers, or generic legalists. It referred to those who were members of the Mosaic covenant and who were susceptible to the Deuteronomic blessings and curses. Likewise, Israel's covenantal status is here described as being "kept under guard by the law." Paul called the Mosaic covenant law a "paedagogos" ("tutor") -- a trainer and teacher of young boys. Israel was taught and governed by this child-trainer until Jesus' advent. And as we will see below, it was the Jews during the OT who were born "under the law." Thus, it should be manifest that the phrase "the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ" (3:24) does not mean that the law should make someone today see that he is a sinner who needs a savior. Individuals today have never been under the Mosaic covenant. Christians are members of the new covenant, and converts were outside of the new covenant before they converted. The tutorial function mentioned here by Paul only applied to those who were actually in the Mosaic covenant. And with the coming of Christ, that covenant was fulfilled and transformed into the more glorious new covenant.

Moreover, we can see that Paul again used "faith" in an eschatological way that does not mesh with the traditional Protestant reading of Galatians. Faith does not here refer to a general trust. It refers in some way to an event in history. Paul referred to the OT period with the words, "before faith came." At this time, the Jews were "kept under guard by the law." But there was a time coming when "the faith" would be revealed. This occurred with the advent of Christ so that "after faith has come," the Mosaic covenant no longer functioned as the guardian that it had been before the coming of the promised One. (Some would argue that "after faith has come" is not a perfect participle but an aorist tense verb that should be translated "because faith came." This does not significantly affect my point here.) But we know that the OT saints were to live their entire lives by faith in God (using "faith" here as general trust in God for all things). Thus, Paul was not here using "faith" in the traditional way. He was not referring to generic trust in God but to an action by God in time.

Some have said that a good translation would be, "But before the faithful One came... that we might be justified by the faithful One. But after the faithful One has come..." -- referring to Jesus. This makes contextual sense, but so does the idea that "faith" refers to the fulfillment of the promise. So an interpretive translation would run as follows. "But before the fulfilled promise came, we were kept under guard by the law -- confined for the promise that would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to the Messiah/Seed (the inheritor of the promise, 3:16) so that we might be justified by the promise. But after the promise was fulfilled, we are no longer under the tutor." On either view, faith and the advent of Christ are synonymous in this passage. Thus, faith is inherently eschatological and does not refer to generic trust in God over against the desire to merit salvation by works. The law was a good governor that God gave to His people, but it was a temporary one. In fact

it had to be temporary, because it created a distinction between Jew and gentile that could not survive after the gospel promise of blessings to all nations had come. The Mosaic covenant made Israel holy -- it set the Jews apart from the gentiles to be God's priestly people to the world. But now that the Seed has come, God's gospel blessings must flow to the world. The governor did its job, but it needed to step aside as God's holiness flowed to all nations.

### **The Conclusion: You are Sons Through Christ**

Paul then summed up his case to that point (3:26-29) and highlighted some conclusions. His conclusion was not "so you see that you cannot merit salvation by what you do." This was not the issue. Rather, he concluded:

"You [gentiles] are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for [i.e., because] all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are in Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise."

There are two points that I would like to highlight here. The first is the redemptive-historical nature of the conclusion. It should not be surprising that we would get such a conclusion to a redemptive-historical argument. The conclusion is simply this. The new creation is here; therefore there is neither Jew nor Greek. Circumcision is no longer applicable. The two old men (who were separated by circumcision and the law) have become one new man in Jesus (cf. Eph. 2:11-19). It is this new man who is the child of Abraham today.

The second point is the specific reference to baptism. Why, we should ask, did Paul reference baptism here? How does such a reference fit in with his argument and conclusion? I would suggest that Paul referred to baptism because he wanted to show the Galatians how circumcision had been transformed by the new covenant.

The point at stake was the post-Advent structure and makeup of the covenant. More specifically, the debate centered on the identity of Abraham's heirs. And in this light, circumcision was of critical importance (Paul referred to it several times in this letter and it is singled out in Acts 15 as well). The Judaizers wanted to cling to the old covenant. Thus, for them, the circumcised Jews were Abraham's heirs. This was how the Abrahamic covenant worked. Circumcision marked out Abraham's heirs and separated them from the rest of humanity (Gen. 17:1-14). But the actual promise to Abraham spoke of something bigger, because God's blessings would eventually be universalized to include all nations. There were earlier hints of this in the form of the "God-fearing" gentiles. The separating rite of circumcision simply would not be applicable when this universalization occurred. Thus, Paul argued against the idea of a perpetually static old covenant in order to conclude that the new covenant heirs of the Abrahamic promise are those who have been baptized into Christ. Now that the Messiah has come, we see that He is in fact the Seed of Abraham in whom the promises reside. Therefore, those who are baptized into Him, whether Jew or Greek, are the children of Abraham. Under the old covenant, one was circumcised into Abraham. Under the new covenant, one is baptized into Christ, the true heir of the Abrahamic promises.

This should not strike us as a new or strange idea, for Paul used the same language with respect to Moses. All of the Exodus Jews passed through the sea and "all were baptized into Moses" (I Cor. 10:1, 2). Moses was their federal (i.e., covenantal) head, and they were baptized into him just as they were circumcised into Abraham. Just two chapters later in the same letter, Paul said, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or gentiles..." (I Cor. 12:13). To the Romans, he wrote, "Do you not know that all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death... For if we have been united with Him in His death..." (Rom. 6:3-5). This is standard incorporation language. Jesus made the same point in His Great Commission. "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Grammatically, the two following participles explain what it means to make disciples. This is how disciples are objectively made – by baptizing them (incorporation into the body of Christ) and then by teaching them (growth within the body).

Christ is the seed of Abraham who is heir to the promise. Therefore, being incorporated into the true Seed is the new covenant equivalent of being incorporated into the Abrahamic covenant in the OT. Baptism, as the "circumcision of Christ," fulfills and transforms circumcision (Col. 2:11, 12). Thus, the contrast brought out by the reference to baptism is between keeping circumcision and the law as if they were God's ultimate and complete design for mankind and being baptized because of faith in the fulfillment of the promises. It is not between doing circumcision legalistically and doing circumcision non-legalistically. This latter contrast is in fact never made. Thus, this is yet another example of how the point and distinction being made are redemptive-historical in nature. In terms of the way the true heirs are marked out, a contrast is drawn between the old circumcision and the new "circumcision of Christ."

### **The True Sons and Their Mother**

After this conclusion, Paul then returned to a brief discussion of the Jews' relationship to the law and what that

means for the gentiles (4:1-11). Until the time appointed by the Father, His people were heirs to a future promise. Before the promise came, they were under the law -- under “guardians and stewards.” But “when the fullness of time had come” (4:4), God sent the promised One and the heirs went from being children bound under guardians to sons who were no longer servants. Thus, it would be a foolish rejection of one’s adoption as a son for him to go back to the guardians. Once again, this argument is about the objective change of the covenant over time -- contrasting a period before the “appointed time” to a period after the appointed One had come. Paul was not contrasting two subjective concepts that are time-independent such as sola fide and legalism. Children are immature of course, and guardians are good for them. The guardian that God established for His people was a good thing, but children cannot remain immature and dependent forever. They also have no business rejecting God’s fulfillment of His gracious promises. The Judaizers wanted in effect to remain children under the tutor, and they wanted to foist this immaturity and anachronism onto the gentiles.

Thus, the Judaizer-influenced gentiles were longing for the old tutor. “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?” (4:21) According to the traditional Protestant understanding of Galatians, what does it mean for someone to desire to be “under the law”? It is often taken to mean that one is trying to merit salvation by doing good works. But this does not work. Paul has already told us what it means to be “under the law.” Jesus was born “under the law” to redeem those “under the law” (4:5). These people were those who were heirs “under guardians and stewards” (4:1, 2). They were “kept under guard by the law” (3:23) which is to say that they were “under a tutor” (3:25). So before “the time appointed by the Father” (4:2), His people were “under the law.” This is obviously not talking about legalism. God Himself put Israel under the tutor and He did so for the reasons that Paul has already mentioned. It was a God-ordained thing that they be “kept under guard by the law” until the Messiah came. This does not have anything to do with men earning anything from God. Moreover, Jesus, as a fellow Jew, was also born “under the law.” Additionally, Paul’s other uses of this phrase are consistent.

“... but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law [gentiles] will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law [Jew] will be judged by the law...” (Rom. 2:10-12)

“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law...” (Rom. 3:19)

“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all... to the Jews I became as a Jew... to those who are under the law [Jews], as under the law... to those who are without law [gentiles], as without law...” (I Cor. 9:19-21)

It should be clear that none of this is referring to legalism or legalists. Paul did not become a legalist to save the legalists. The law does not speak to those who are under the law -- the legalists. The distinction is between Jew and gentile, not between legalist and non-legalist. Those who were without law / apart from the law were the gentiles. Those who were under “the law” -- the Mosaic Law -- were the Jews. And that was the design of the Mosaic covenant. God took a special, priestly people for Himself and put them under the law (this, as we have seen, was the point of Lev. 18:4, 5). But this was always temporary -- until the promised Servant came. This is what it meant to be “under the law.” It was the objective state of being under the Mosaic covenant, and it was not contingent on one’s subjective attitude about the relationship between generic faith and works.

A good translation of 4:21 would therefore look like this: “Tell me, you who desire to be under the Mosaic covenant, do you not hear the Mosaic covenant?” The most non-legalistic Galatian gentile who sincerely believed that he should get circumcised in order to be faithful (but not in order to earn anything) would still have been trying to “go under the law.” It was an objective behavior that would have been wrong regardless of the offender’s motivations. So Paul was not critiquing the Galatians’ misunderstanding of the old covenant with respect to questions of merit. He was rejecting an objective behavior; namely, the attempt to be under that covenant at all (regardless of how one understands that covenant’s teaching with respect to merit).

The Galatians were thinking about going under the law, so Paul went to the law. He talked quite a bit about promises. These promises centered on the idea that God would bless the nations through Abraham. Paul also concluded that these promises are fulfilled by and through the Messiah apart from the Mosaic covenant. Before the Messiah came, the blessings of Abraham came to the Jews by virtue of their being “in Abraham” by circumcision. (Once again, this has nothing to do with man earning anything from God.) But now, the fullness of the promised blessings has come through the Messiah to all nations apart from the old order. The true seed of Abraham is Christ, and now that He has come, the heirs to the promises are those in Him.

But what does this have to do with Paul’s contrast of the “Jerusalem which now is” with “the Jerusalem above” (4:24-26)? He claimed that the children of the latter Jerusalem are the Galatians. The obvious response would be: who cares? What is this other Jerusalem and why should we care who her children are? What does this have to do with identifying Abraham’s heirs?

“For it is written...  
‘Rejoice, O barren,  
you who do not bear!  
Break forth and shout,  
you who are not in labor!  
For the desolate has many more children  
than she who has a husband.’” (4:27 quoting Is. 54:1)

So why quote Is 54:1? How does it answer our questions? To begin with, Jews did not quote Scripture as isolated proof texts like we often do. They expected their audience to understand the context. What is the context of Is 54?

To get the full context, we should really read all of Isaiah from chapter 40 on. But to single out just a little of what could be said, we should take note of Is. 49:5-8; 51:4-6; 52:1, 2, 6-10; 53:10-12; 54:1-3; 55:3-5; 56:3-8; 59:15 - 60:7. What Paul referred to here is nothing less than the promised new creation. God will judge the old order and then He will make a new heaven and earth (Is. 65:17-23). There are a multitude of references here. The founding of the Mosaic covenant was like a new heaven and earth (Is. 51:13-16), but this order would be judged and a new Eden would emerge from the desert that the people were in. This new creation would be the restoration of Zion (Is. 40:1-11; 51:1-6; 52:1-10). This is the Jerusalem from above: the restored and much improved Zion. The sun and the moon would no longer be needed for light, because “the Lord will be to you an everlasting light” (Is. 60:19). Sound familiar (cf. Rev. 21:23)? But this new creation would not simply be for the Jews alone. The Servant by whom all of this takes place would also be a light and a covenant to the nations (Is. 49:5-8; 56:3-8; 60:1-4). The foreigner would be brought to God’s holy mountain, for “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Is. 56:7). Sound familiar (Matt. 21:12, 13)? God would send His Spirit upon all His people. Even eunuchs who were once officially banned from the covenant would now be included (Is. 56:3-5). God is the God of the whole earth (Is. 54:5), so the new creation would mean life for the whole world. This return of the Servant-King to form this new creation was in fact the gospel.

“How beautiful upon the mountains  
are the feet of him who brings good news [lit. “gospel”],  
who proclaims peace,  
who brings glad tidings of good things [lit. “gospel”],  
who proclaims salvation,  
who says to Zion,  
‘Your God reigns!’” (Is. 52:7)

It was the fulfillment of the gospel promise to Abraham (cf. Gal. 3:8).

This is what one invokes when one references some portion of the latter part of Isaiah. And Paul’s reference here is hardly the only one in the NT. There are numerous quotations of and allusions to the latter part of Isaiah in the NT. All of them were designed to make redemptive-historical points that are similar to or related to the one that Paul made here. The promised Servant / new age had arrived. Who is the Jerusalem from above? She is the restored and recreated Zion -- the Church of Jesus (cf. Heb. 12:18-24). Who are her children; who are the children of the promise? Jews as well as gentiles from all nations are her children. Who says? God promised this gospel beforehand, and now through His Servant Jesus, He has fulfilled these promises. One does not reference the latter part of Isaiah to argue against legalists; such a reference would be a glaring non sequitur. That text does not discuss legalism, but it is almost completely occupied by the promised new age. Neither does one adequately address legalists by bringing up the Jerusalem from above – the restored Jerusalem. It would not refute their error at all. The restored Jerusalem is a new creation entity based on historical promises. The error of legalism is in a different category all together.

Finally, we can note that Paul’s use of Isaiah is very similar to the way the argument in Acts 15 was concluded. To refute the Judaizers, the apostles first showed how God gave the gentiles the promised Spirit apart from the old order (Acts 15:7-9; in connection with this, see the promise of Joel quoted in Acts 2). The last point the apostles made was just like Paul’s last argumentative point: they both quoted the OT promise of a universal gospel. Paul quoted the promise from Isaiah. The apostles quoted from Amos 9:

“Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

“After this I will return  
and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down;  
I will rebuild its ruins,  
and I will set it up;  
so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,

even all the gentiles who are called by My name,” says the Lord who does all these things.” (Acts 15:13-17 quoting Amos 9:11, 12)

When the house of David is restored, it would include the nations who will also bear God’s name. This is central to the gospel promise. Through the Servant, God restores His people and becomes a light to the gentiles. This is how you argue against Judaizers. You do not quote OT passages like Deut. 7:6-8 and 9:4-6 to show that people cannot merit God’s gifts. Rather, you quote the OT promise of a new creation with a restored, gentile-including Zion. After all, this is the gospel.

### **The Penultimate Conclusion**

Paul was not yet finished with his letter, but he provided a conclusion to his argument that spelled out the only possible alternatives.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.” (5:1-6)

It is a good thing for children to be kept under guard and “in bondage” for a time. They need this security and discipline when they are young. From their perspective, the home should be a dictatorship, not a democracy. But it would surely be a bad thing for adults to desire to go back to this bondage after they have matured. They would be fundamentally denying who they are. And this is what the Judaizers were advocating: perpetual childhood. This temporary bondage is a good thing for children, but if it was perverted by making it permanent, such bondage would be all that the Galatians would have. They would not have Christ as their sin offering because they would have denied His very mission. They would have denied that He had fulfilled the guardian (which included the sacrificial system) and set them free from it. They were given this gracious freedom, so the denial of it would constitute a fall from grace.

The Galatians could not legitimately seek the old order because it had been fulfilled and transformed. In just a few decades, the only thing left of the old order would be “the curse of the law” that was poured out on unfaithful Israel. God did give Israel a grace period – a time to recognize this change and accept the Messiah. This time period ran from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (roughly 30 A.D.) to God’s final judgment on Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But during this time, the old order was “obsolete” and would soon disappear (Heb. 8:13 cf. I Cor. 7:29-31). These were the “last days” of the old order (Acts 2:14-17; Heb. 1:1, 2; I John 2:18). A new creation had dawned. Thus, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything” now that the Messiah had come.

Once again, we can see what Paul did not conclude. He did not say that circumcision was good as long as the Galatians did not pervert it by thinking that by it they could earn salvation. He did not say that circumcision was rightly understood as unmerited grace from God (although it surely was). Rather, there had been an objective, real change in the covenant. Now, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplish anything. The whole category (along with the OT separation between Jew and gentile) has been abolished. Moreover, contrasting circumcision with a working faith is not how one would normally go about refuting someone in the grips of legalism. While such an approach is not fundamentally illogical, it would not be a good idea. It would just open up another door (in his eyes) for works to enter in and play a causative roll in salvation. In fact, this is just what it does for those Roman Catholics who try to use this contrast to show that our works do contribute (in a causative way) to our salvation. But they have likewise misunderstood the problem in Galatia as well as Paul’s response to it. The topic of merit as Protestants and Roman Catholics conceive of it was simply not the issue.

### **The Final Conclusion**

Paul’s final conclusion to the Galatians did not involve a comparison between trusting God for salvation and working to merit salvation. Rather, he concluded with a redemptive-historical contrast that by now should be familiar. Even the NIV Thompson Chain-Reference Bible gets it right. The NIV’s heading for verses 11-18 of chapter six is: “Not Circumcision But a New Creation.” We are not in the old creation but the new creation. This was the conclusion to all of Paul’s points in this letter. Yet again, we should see that this is a redemptive-historical contrast between old and new, not a contrast between meriting and not meriting salvation. “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ... for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.” (6:14, 15) Among other things, this is what the cross did. It produced a new creation with one new man from the two (cf. Eph. 2:11-19). There is now neither Jew nor Greek. Circumcision, along with the distinction that it helped create, is gone. The old order is obsolete; the new creation is here now in the gentiles because of what the Messiah, the promised One, has done. This is the mystery of the gospel -- Christ in the gentiles apart from the old

covenants (cf. Col. 1:24-27). The King had arrived and fulfilled the promises. The new creation is here. The old creation was good and it served an important purpose, but any attempt to return to it now is simply a perversion of the gospel. It only leads to bondage -- a bondage without Jesus, the only true sin offering.