

# OpenTheo

## June 17th: Joshua 24 & Galatians 2

June 17, 2020



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Covenant renewal, death of Joshua, and burial of Joseph. Justification through faith of Christ rather than the works of the Law.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## **Transcript**

Joshua Chapter 24. Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God.

And Joshua said to all the people, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Long ago your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah the father of Abraham, and of Nahor, and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the river, and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau, and I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess.

But Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it, and afterward I brought you out. Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea.

And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. And when they cried to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them. And your eyes saw what I did in Egypt.

And you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan. They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you.

Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel. And he sent and invited Balaam, the son of Beor, to curse you. But I would not listen to Balaam.

Indeed, he blessed you, so I delivered you out of his hand. And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, and the leaders of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Gergeshites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And I gave them into your hand, and I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites.

It was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.

Now therefore fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your father served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your father served in the region beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell.

But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Then the people answered, Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. And the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites, who lived in the land.

Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for He is our God. But Joshua said to the people, You are not able to serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God.

He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good. And the people said to Joshua, No, but we will serve the Lord.

Then Joshua said to the people, You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord to serve Him. And they said, We are witnesses. He said, Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of

Israel.

And the people said to Joshua, The Lord our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

And Joshua said to all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord that He spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God. So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance.

After these things, Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being 110 years old, and they buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-sira, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gash. Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel. As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money.

It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. And Eleazar the son of Aaron died, and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of Phinehas his son, which had been given him in the hill country of Ephraim. In Joshua chapter 24, the book ends with a covenant renewal ceremony.

Joshua is nearing death and summons the people to Shechem. Joshua was described as a young man in Exodus chapter 33 verse 11, and as the assistant to Moses from his youth in Numbers chapter 11 verse 28. Yet he was old enough to lead the fight against the Amalekites in Exodus chapter 17.

If he was in his early to mid-twenties at that time, he would probably have been 60 to 65 years old when they entered into the land, and around 70 at the end of the main campaign. These events would be around 40 years later then. Much as Moses led Israel in entering the covenant at Sinai, and then renewed the covenant on the plains of Moab 40 years later, before he died, so Joshua led Israel in a covenant ceremony in Joshua chapter 8, and now, about 40 years later, he is about to die, and leads them in a renewal ceremony.

Shechem was a significant site. It was near Shechem that they had performed the covenant ceremony, involving Mount Ebal and Gerizim, in Joshua chapter 8 verses 30 to 35. At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an

iron tool, and they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings.

And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native-born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim, and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the first, to bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law.

There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them. Now Joshua returns Israel to Shechem for a renewal of the covenant. Shechem was also an important place in Israel's earlier history.

Shechem was a site of decision for Jacob and his family earlier on in Genesis 35, verses 1-4. God said to Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress, and has been with me wherever I have gone. So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears.

Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. This significant site of covenant remembrance was marked by a particular terebinth tree, beneath which the foreign gods and the rings of the people of Jacob were buried. Now the terebinth tree is mentioned for a second time, as Joshua will erect a witness stone beneath it, testifying to Israel's decision to serve the Lord, much as Jacob buried the false gods of his people beneath that tree.

That tree functioned as a landmark of national commitment, and in the same place where the false gods of Israel were abandoned, the true worship of the Lord seems to have been established. Joshua retells the entire story of Israel to this point, from Terah the father of Abraham onwards. The book of Joshua ends the Hexateuch, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua.

And now we see all of the story of the Hexateuch to this point recounted by the Lord, as we, with Joshua and the Israelites, look back upon the path that the Lord has taken Israel upon. The story is told as the story of the work of the Lord. The Lord is the great actor in the story, and the concern for Israel will be whether they will commit themselves to the

Lord in their proper response.

For instance, rather than reading about the actions of Moses and Aaron, they are presented as expressions of the actions of the Lord. The Lord sent them. Sinai is not mentioned, because it is the work of the Lord that is being emphasised, not the reciprocity of the covenant that we see at places like Sinai.

God is the one who has been graciously driving forward the history of Israel throughout. The fact that Israel didn't accomplish their deliverance themselves, and now enjoys blessings which they never worked for nor merited, is emphasised. The Lord sent the hornet, an obscure expression, before them to drive out their enemies, and now they enjoy the cities of their enemies, houses, crops and fruits of a land that has largely been given into their hands with little labour on their own part.

Reference to the hornet is also found in Exodus 23, 28 And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites and the Hittites from before you. And then again in Deuteronomy 7, 20 Moreover the Lord your God will send hornets among them, until those who are left and hide themselves from you are destroyed. This might refer to fear, or it might refer to literal plagues of hornets, which drove people from the land.

The stings of hornets could be exceedingly painful, and fatal in some cases. Especially striking is the way that Joshua foregrounds geography, and a geographical itinerary in his speech. Israel's covenant identity is one that is geographically articulated.

They are taken from beyond the river, they are led through the land of Canaan, in promissory anticipation of their possession of it. They are distinguished from the dwelling place of their brother Esau, they are brought down into Egypt, they are delivered from bondage and brought into covenant through the Red Sea. They pass through the Jordan and into the land of the Canaanites, given into their possession.

This itinerary is a spiritual passage towards their current identity. It is a movement from idolatry to knowledge of the Lord. From Abram's promissory pilgrimage around the land, from the bondage and renewed idolatry of Egypt, this is the first time that it is made explicit that Israel were idolaters in Egypt.

They are led through the testing of the wilderness, and into the reception of the Lord's promise. Telling their history in this sort of way, Joshua presents Israel's situatedness in the land of Canaan, to be a consequence of their journey into the knowledge of the Lord, and consequently dependent upon their continued faithfulness to him. On the far sides of the river Euphrates and the Red Sea, idolatry still beckons.

If they are unfaithful, the Canaanite nations could still rise up and choke the seed of Israel that the Lord has planted in the land. Neighbouring and ancestrally related nations

of Edom and Moab, who do not enjoy Israel's covenant relationship with the Lord, also alert Israel to the contingency of their present status. Water crossings play an especially important part in Joshua's theological geography.

The river Euphrates is referenced four times. The Jordan is mentioned twice, and two verses are devoted to recounting the crossing of the Red Sea, verses 6-7. The prominence of these rivers and bodies of water in Joshua's account is noteworthy.

Throughout scripture, the crossings of such water bodies represent transitions from one realm to another, and from one existence or identity to another. The river is a liminal realm, a place through which passage can be made from something old into something new. The river or the sea is a boundary or threshold.

It is an enduring testament also to a historical passage into Israel's current identity that has occurred. Israel's entrance into Canaan through a series of water crossings was something of which they were always to be reminded, as they regarded the bodies of water bordering and running throughout their land. The Lord's presence in dealing with Israel at the water crossings underlines this fact.

He called them from the other side of the river Euphrates. He wrestled with their father Jacob and gave the people their name, Israel, at the Jabbok. He delivered them through the Red Sea.

He brought them into the land through the Jordan. Through these water crossings, or washings, Israel was set apart to the Lord as a royal priesthood and a holy nation. Although they were uniquely set apart as the Lord's own special possession and covenant people, Israel was also to recognise that the Lord had given lands to other nations.

The descendants of Esau had been given the hill country of Seir as their possession. In verse 4, Israel's peculiar calling was understood in terms of a broader appreciation that the Lord establishes the times and bounds of habitation for all peoples. The dispossession of the peoples of Canaan was an act of judgment of the Lord upon their wickedness.

And as we see elsewhere in scripture, the implicit threat is that the Lord would uproot Israel from the land too, if they proved to be unfaithful. Israel is challenged, as Jacob once challenged his people at the exact same spot, to put away the gods of their fathers and the gods of the Amorites of the land, and to serve the Lord exclusively. This day is a day of decision, a day on which they must choose who they will serve.

Joshua himself expresses his commitment that he and his house will serve the Lord. And the people express their commitment to serve the Lord too. However, Joshua gives a surprising and perhaps a shocking response.

He plays an adversarial and accusatory role, telling them that they are unable to serve the Lord. The Lord is a jealous God and they will not be faithful to him. The result will be severe judgment falling upon them.

Joshua's statement here underlines the faithful character of Israel's choice. He calls them witnesses against themselves in this matter, addressing them in terms of expected future unfaithfulness. He erects a memorial stone beneath the tree to witness against Israel.

The book ends with the death of Joshua at the age of 110, when he is buried in his territory within the land. We might recall Joseph at this point, as the death of Joseph ends the first book of the Hexateuch, Genesis, and he also dies at the age of 110, Genesis chapter 50, verses 24-26. And Joseph said to his brothers, I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here. So Joseph died being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.

This is a curious detail, and it's made all the more curious by the fact that immediately after the death of Joshua, we read of the burial of Joseph's bones. Is anything going on here? First, we should recognise that Joseph's bones were an important part of the whole story from Genesis onwards. The story of the Exodus is, among other things, the story of the repatriation of Joseph, the lost son.

The promise concerning Joseph's bones is made in Genesis 50, and it's a promise that's seen as evidence of his faith in Hebrews 11, verse 22. By faith, Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites, and gave directions concerning his bones. Joseph's bones appear again at the time of the exodus, in Exodus 13, verse 19.

Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here. And then finally they're found in this chapter, in Joshua 24, verse 32. As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money.

It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. Joseph, then, is buried in Shechem. This was the fateful location where Joseph went to seek out his brothers, which led to him being taken down to Egypt in the first place.

Telling the fate of Joseph's bones at this point seems strange, perhaps. Did Israel wait 40 or 50 years after first reaching Shechem to bury Joseph's bones there? Probably not.

However, the burial of Joseph's bones completes a central underlying theme of the entire Hexertuke.

It also connects Joseph being laid to rest with the death of Joshua. Joshua, as we learn in Numbers chapter 13, was an Ephraimite, a descendant of Joseph himself. Joseph played the part of a spy, bringing back a bad report concerning his brothers.

Joshua was the descendant of Joseph, marked out by bringing a good report. He was joined by Caleb, the descendant of Judah, who had once tried to persuade his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. Yet now, Caleb joined Joshua in his good report and tried to persuade his brothers to enter into the land.

Joshua, the descendant of Joseph, with his comrade Caleb, the descendant of Judah, were setting something right that had gone wrong so many years before. And now the memory of Joseph could properly be laid to rest. The lost son was now buried in the plot of land that had been given to him by his father back in Genesis.

A question to consider. Unlike in the context of the death of Moses, there is no account of succession here. How do the deaths of Joshua and of Eleazar the priest mark an existential transition for Israel? Galatians chapter 2 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me.

I went up because of a revelation and set before them, though privately before those who seemed influential, the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ, so that they might bring us into slavery, to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

And from those who seemed to be influential, what they were makes no difference to me, God shows no partiality. Those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles, and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised, only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned, for before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles, but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party, and the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with them, so that even Barnabas was



led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews? We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not, for if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor, for through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. In Galatians chapter 2 Paul continues to recount his biography. He is continuing to emphasise the divine source of his message, and the confirmatory recognition of the Jerusalem apostles to its veracity.

Various proposals have been advanced for how to tally this with the narrative of Acts. Many believe that the visit to Jerusalem after 14 years occurs in Acts chapter 15 at the Jerusalem council. I am far more inclined to believe that it occurred in Acts chapter 11 verses 27-30.

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world. This took place in the days of Claudius. So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. This fits far more neatly with Paul's claim that he went up because of a revelation. However it does present challenges in other respects, because if this was 14 years after Paul's conversion, it presses the date of that event back to around 30 AD, which, while not impossible, is extremely early.

I still think it's a much neater fit though. While in Jerusalem, for the purpose of bringing relief to the saints there during the famine, Paul privately presented the gospel he had been preaching before certain leading figures there. 14 years after his conversion, and many years since he had started preaching, he was confirming his message with the leaders there, ensuring that he had not preached in vain.

Now Paul clearly knew that he had received his gospel by direct revelation, as he made clear in chapter 1. However, confirmation that he was on the same page as the leaders

in Jerusalem was very important. Disagreement at this point would be a most serious matter. Indeed, if Paul and Jerusalem were not in agreement, Paul's ministry would struggle to affect the union of Jews and Gentiles that he believed was inherent in the gospel message.

The Jews would follow the Jerusalem leaders, and the Gentiles would look to Paul. So the agreement that occurred at that meeting, a meeting that's not recorded at all in the Book of Acts, where we are simply told of Barnabas and Saul going down to Jerusalem, and then returning from Jerusalem, was of truly immense significance. In principle, it established the fact that the church was defined not by the exclusive marks of Judaism, but by the death and resurrection of Christ, and that Gentiles could be members of this community no less than Jews.

While he was in Jerusalem, Paul's companion Titus, although an uncircumcised Greek, was not expected to be circumcised, and the Jerusalem leaders recognised the calling of Paul, and did not call for him to change anything of his message. Indeed, the leaders also recognised, quite remarkably, a symmetry between Paul and Peter. In verse 7, they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised.

Paul represents to the Gentiles what Peter represents to the Jews, their counterparts. Peter was clearly the leading apostle, which is why he is singled out as the one to whom this ministry is committed. In Matthew 16, verses 17-18, And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Peter was a pillar, and interestingly, it is only in the context of speaking of Peter's apostolic vocation that Paul speaks of him as Peter. Everywhere else he is always cephias.

Peter, like Paul, received his understanding not from flesh and blood, but directly from God. The leaders of Jerusalem give Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, and they tell them to go to the Gentiles, while they will go to the circumcised. And this suggestion that Paul and Peter are counterparts implies that the uncircumcised Gentiles are not second class members of the Kingdom of God.

The Jerusalem leaders ask Paul and Barnabas to remember the poor, which might seem to be a strange detail at this point. However, it is not an extraneous detail, and it makes a lot of sense in the context of Acts 11-12. The poor here are likely not the poor in general, but more specifically the poor saints in Jerusalem.

Paul had just been sent with Barnabas on a mission to bring aid to the poor in Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem leaders are asking him to make sure that he does not forget them.

And throughout Paul's epistles, we see his concern to gather funds for the saints in Jerusalem. The collection for the poor Judean saints is a task with a theological impulse to it.

It expresses the concern of the Gentiles for the Jews, and is a very powerful manifestation of the unity of the Church as a single body of mutual concern. Gathering for the poor in Jerusalem became a central element of Paul's apostolic practice. He describes the reasons for this in Romans 15-17.

We learn in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 that the Galatians had also participated in this gathering for the saints in Jerusalem. However, in Antioch, Paul has a confrontation with Cephas. This, I believe, occurs at the beginning of Acts 15, after Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch at the end of Acts 14.

Acts 15 verses 1-2 describes the conflict. But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

The details here tally with details of Paul's description of the events in Galatians 2, that it occurred in Antioch, that it was sparked by men coming up from Judea, and that there was considerable debate and division as a result. Cephas presumably arrived in Antioch just before the events of Acts 15, and when the men from Judea, from the church that James oversaw, came on the scene, he changed his practice of eating with the Gentiles, so as not to get into conflict with a powerful group in the Jerusalem church. This change in his practice immediately created a practical breach between apparently first-class Jewish Christians and second-class Gentile Christians.

And this breach would have been most powerfully felt in the context of the Lord's Supper, where Jews and Gentiles would not be able to eat together. It is not entirely clear who the circumcision party are here. Are they Jews more generally, or are they Christians from Judea, requiring circumcision of Gentiles? It seems to me it's more likely the latter.

Paul saw Peter and other Jews like Barnabas who went along with the circumcision party as hypocrites. They weren't acting according to their personal convictions or in a consistent manner. But through fear, in a manner calculated to keep the peace.

More seriously, they were compromising the Gospel, in which Jews and Gentiles were now to constitute a single body. The outcome of this incident is described in Acts 15, verses 3-11. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, it is necessary to circumcise them, and to order them to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel and believe, and God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples, that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear, but we believe we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. Paul, however, does not record the Jerusalem Council, the event of Acts chapter 15 at which Peter's speech suggests that Paul's argument won the day.

Rather, in verses 15 to 21, Paul presents the argument that he made to Peter at the time in Antioch, an argument that presents the message of the rest of the book of Galatians in outline. By withdrawing from fellowship with Gentiles, Peter had re-established Jewish law as the framework over that of the new people established and defined by the rule of the Messiah. The point here is not ethnic exclusivism, but a practical denial and overturning of the reality brought in by the Gospel, a single Jew-Gentile people under the reign of the Messiah, defined by Christ, not by the Jewish law.

Paul argues that while he and Peter would once have regarded themselves chiefly in terms of their Jewish birth, with Gentiles being thought of as outsiders and sinners, they now know otherwise. People are not ultimately shown to be in right standing with God on the basis of things like circumcision, through the dietary laws, through temple sacrifice and Jewish rituals, through Sabbaths and feasts. These practices were the markers of Jewish identity, the signs of covenant status.

This is what Paul primarily means by the expression, the works of the law. The works of the law that Paul speaks of here are not the actions required by the moral law, so much as they are Torah observance in a more specific sense, the practice of the more distinctive practices characteristic of Jewish identity. Many have read Paul's statements here as a denial of what has been called works righteousness, the attempt to earn salvation through good deeds, something that was very rightly and importantly challenged in the Reformation.

Now that point is true enough, and it's an exceedingly important one that's taught elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments. However much of Paul's theology isn't making this point, it's making a slightly different one. His focus is not on moral deeds

done to merit our standing before God, but on something more subtle.

It's about the practice of the Torah in the belief that observant Jewish covenant identity is what marks people out as being in right standing with God. The point is not earning salvation in such a manner, but receiving it in this way. But Paul makes it clear that this is not the way that the grace of Christ is received.

Recognising this truth, Peter, like Paul, had believed in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, so that they could enjoy right standing with God on that basis, not through Jewish covenant identity and Torah observance, but through the faith of Christ. Now what does this expression, faith of Christ, mean? Typically it has been taken to mean faith in Christ, and most translations of the Bible have faith in Christ at this point. What has been called the objective genitive reading.

A few decades ago the work of Richard Hayes and others reignited the case for what has been called the subjective genitive reading, that it refers to the faith of Christ, generally understood as Christ's faithfulness in going to the cross for us. Others have ventured mediating suggestions, such as a genitive of quality, an example being speaking of Christ faith, a faith exercised by believers in dependence upon and defined by Christ. And I believe that something along these lines is probably to be preferred over the other options, although at points I would lean slightly more to some of the senses highlighted by the subjective genitive, without believing that the subjective genitive is the best way to translate it.

The expression is, I believe, similar to that of the faith of Abraham in places like Romans 4, verse 16. The faith of Abraham is Abraham faith. It's both the faith of Abraham personally, and the faith of the sons and daughters of Abraham who walk in his footsteps.

In verse 16 it's juxtaposed with the works of the law. The works of the law are ordered around the reality of the law, while our faith is ordered around the reality and work of Christ. In verse 17 Paul's argument proceeds.

If Paul and Peter, in their commitment to enjoying right standing with God on the basis of Christ, seemed like those they formally categorised as sinners, Gentile outsiders to the covenant, as they lived like Gentiles and fraternised with Gentile Christians, does this make Christ someone creating a sinful and unclean body of people? Certainly not. However, if they re-erect the division between Jews and Gentiles established by Torah observance, that division that they had just dismantled, this is exactly what would appear to be the case. Paul ends the passage with a startling and beautiful declaration of how his existence is now entirely defined by Christ, no longer by the Torah.

The Torah, the Jewish law, hasn't ceased to exist, but it no longer plays the normative role in Paul's life. He has died to the Torah, through the Torah. There's a sort of paradox

here, as the Torah plays a role in its own destruction.

I take this to refer to the fact that the Torah was always designed to serve a limited purpose, and that as it fulfills its purpose through the cross of Christ, it releases us from itself. Paul's old existence, defined by the Torah, ended at Christ's cross, and now he has a new existence, defined by Christ and his life. Paul has died, and risen again.

The old Paul, the Torah-observant Paul, zealous for the traditions of his fathers, that he describes in chapter 1, verses 13-14, he's died. And the new Paul lives his life out of the life of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Christ is living in him, by his spirit.

To turn back to Torah observance, as that which defines those in right standing with God, would be to nullify the death of Christ, and the immeasurable grace of God that is expressed in that event. A question to consider. In verses 18-21, Paul switches from the more general we statements that he has been making earlier, to some of the most powerful I statements in the entirety of the scriptures.

Why might this shift be so important and illuminating?