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The failure to occupy the land. The promise of Abraham does not come through the Torah.

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

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Transcript

Judges chapter 1. 1. The Lord gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand, and they defeated 10,000 of them at Bezek. 2. They found Adonai Bezek at Bezek, and fought against him, and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. 3. Adonai Bezek fled, but they pursued him, and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his big toes.

4. And Adonai Bezek said, Seventy kings, with their thumbs and their big toes cut off, used to pick up scraps under my table, as I have done, so God has repaid me. 5. And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there. 6. And the men of Judah fought against Jerusalem, and captured it, and struck it with the edge of the sword, and set the city on fire.

7. And afterward the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who lived in the hill country, in the Negev, and in the lowland. 8. And Judah went against the

Canaanites who lived in Hebron. 9. Now the name of Hebron was formerly Kiriath-Aba, and they defeated Shishai, and Haman, and Talmai.

10. From there they went against the inhabitants of Deba. The name of Deba was formerly Kiriath-Sephar.

11. And Caleb said, He who attacks Kiriath-Sephar and captures it, I will give him Aksar my daughter for a wife. 12.

And Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, captured it, and he gave him Aksar his daughter for a wife. 13. When she came to him, she urged him to ask her father for a field.

14. And she dismounted from her donkey, and Caleb said to her, What do you want? 15. She said to him, Give me a blessing, since you have set me in the land of the Negev, give me also springs of water.

16. And Caleb gave her the upper springs and the lower springs. 17.

And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Israel, from the city of Palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negev near Arad. 18. And they went and settled with the people.

And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath, and devoted it to destruction. So the name of the city was called Hormeh. 19.

Judah also captured Gaza with its territory, and Ashkelon with its territory, and Ekron with its territory. 20. And the Lord was with Judah, and he took possession of the hill country.

But he could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain, because they had chariots of iron. 21. And Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said.

And he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem. So the Jebusites have lived with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.

22. The house of Joseph also went up against Bethel, and the Lord was with them. And the house of Joseph scouted out Bethel.

Now the name of the city was formerly Luz. 23. And the spies saw a man coming out of the city.

And they said to him, Please show us the way into the city, and we will deal kindly with you. And he showed them the way into the city. And they struck the city with the edge of

the sword.

But they let the man and all his family go. 24. And the man went to the land of the Hittites, and built a city, and called it Luz.

That is its name to this day. 25. Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-she-an and its villages, or Teanach and its villages, or the inhabitants of Dor and its villages, or the inhabitants of Iblum and its villages, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages.

For the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land. 26. When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labour, but did not drive them out completely.

And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Giza, so the Canaanites lived in Giza among them. Zebulun did not drive out the inhabitants of Kitron, or the inhabitants of Nahlol, so the Canaanites lived among them, but became subject to forced labour. 27.

Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Akko, or the inhabitants of Sidon, or of Alub, or of Aqsib, or of Helba, or of Aphek, or of Rehob, so the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, for they did not drive them out. 28. Naphtali did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh, or the inhabitants of Beth-anath, so they lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land.

Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Beth-shemesh and of Beth-anath became subject to forced labour for them. 29. The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain.

The Amorites persisted in dwelling in Mount Herod's, in Ejlou, and in Sheolbim, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labour. And the border of the Amorites ran from the ascent of Akrabim, from Sila and upward. The book of Judges begins after the death of Joshua.

Before his death, Moses passed on the reins to Joshua, who was appointed as the new leader. Joshua was a rather different leader from Moses. Whereas Moses represented the Lord more powerfully over against Israel, Joshua represented and related to the people much more directly.

However, Joshua didn't appoint a successor in the way that Moses did. John Barrett compares the death of Joshua to the ascension of Jesus in this respect. Jesus doesn't appoint a new Jesus-like figure to take his place.

Rather, leadership is taken up by the apostles and the elders. The book of Judges begins with the Israelites inquiring of the Lord more directly themselves, rather than Moses or Joshua doing it for them. The beginning of Judges is similar to the beginning of the book

of Joshua.

However, the similarities also serve to highlight the differences. At the beginning of Judges, the people are taking much more agency themselves. The Lord doesn't directly instruct a leader over them.

Rather, they must inquire of the Lord themselves. The first chapter of Judges sets the tone for much of what follows. It's a chapter of occasional and partial victories and of various failures.

Whereas the book of Joshua generally struck a more positive note regarding the success of the conquest, in Judges we see just how much remains to be done. There is a difference between taking territory and possessing it. Israel has gone throughout the land, defeating cities as they went.

However, when they moved on, Canaanites would regroup, rebuild and reoccupy territory that had been taken earlier. At the end of Joshua we discover that there were still many Canaanites in the land. And in the beginning of Judges we see just how many.

The rest of the book of Judges will be about securing and consolidating the gains of the conquest. If the book of Joshua is like Abraham, moving throughout the land and building altars and digging wells, the book of Judges is like Isaac, who has to consolidate the work of his father, re-digging or re-establishing wells of his father that have been lost or taken. The Lord had previously said that they would not take the land in one fell swoop.

In Exodus 23, verses 29-31, In Exodus 23, verses 29-31, But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them. In Judges chapter 1 we see both the gradual character of the conquest, but also the failure of Israel to drive out the Canaanites and possess the land, and the ongoing problems that produced.

Many of the details described recall or repeat earlier accounts from the book of Joshua. Working out the chronological order of events in Joshua and Judges relative to the fixed points of the entry into the land and the death of Joshua is not straightforward. In Joshua some events seem to occur prior to the death of Joshua that here seem to occur afterward.

The material in both Joshua and Judges is ordered less with a concern for chronological clarity than with a concern for the meaning of the events being recounted. Although Judges chapter 1 begins with the death of Joshua, chapter 2 recounts the death of Joshua again. My suspicion is that much of the material from verse 3 to the end of the chapter might have occurred in the 40 years or so that probably intervened between the entry into the promised land and the death of Joshua, rather than subsequently.

The ordering of the material is less chronological than geographical and according to the order of the tribes. The death of Joshua was probably over 40 years after the first entry into the land and they are still fighting to occupy some of their territory. This gives some sense of how long the process of the conquest and the consolidation of the possession of the land was.

As at the beginning of the initial conquest in Joshua, they start in Jericho as we see in verse 16. Jericho is the city of palms and they are taking over the land. The Lord declares that the Judahites should go up first.

We should probably hear something more in the statement the land has been given into Judah's hand. Judah will lead the tribes into battle and the tribe of Judah will also come to lead the nation. The pre-eminence of Judah among the tribes was already seen in Genesis chapter 49 verses 8 to 10.

Judah your brother shall praise you, your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies, your father's son shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's cub, from the prey my son you have gone up. He stooped down, he crouched as a lion, and as a lioness who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler starve from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

In Numbers chapter 2 the tribe of Judah was also the tribe that led Israel on its marches. There is an implicit answer not just to the question of who will lead Israel in the fight against the Canaanites, but also to the question of what sort of rule would emerge after the deaths of Moses and Joshua in time. We should also notice here that the people are dividing more into their tribal groups, without a single human leader over the whole nation or a gathered assembly of the whole nation at this time.

The order of Judges 1 is carefully stylised. It can be divided into two halves. The first half from verses 3 to 21 and the second from 22 to 36.

The first concerns the southern tribes, Judah, Simeon and Benjamin. It's led by Judah. The second concerns the northern six and a half tribes, although no mention is made of Issachar at this point, and they are led by the house of Joseph.

Judah and Simeon form an alliance and begin with a great victory over Adonai Bezach, where they defeat over 10,000 of his men, a round number that clearly seems numerically significant for its suggestion of completeness. It's a resounding victory. Simeon's territory as a tribe lies within the borders of Judah, and the pact between the two leads to the absorption of the former into the latter in time.

They cut off the thumbs and the big toes of Adonai Bezach. This is an act of justice. It's testified to by Adonai Bezach himself, as he had done the same thing to 70 rulers.

Adonai Bezach is, beyond being an important defeated enemy, something of a

representation of the brutality of the Canaanites and the reason why the Lord sent Israel to destroy them. Adonai Bezach rules over 70 rulers, perhaps reminding the reader of the 70 nations of the world, mentioned in chapter 10 of Genesis. The Judahites capture the city of Jerusalem and set it on fire.

The mention of Jerusalem at this point is important. It will later be the royal city, where the kings of Judah will reign. Both in the opening reference to the pre-eminence of Judah and the presence of Jerusalem in the narrative, some royal themes are starting to emerge in a book that will be about a period in which there was no king in Israel.

It will not be until 2 Samuel chapter 5 that Jerusalem is finally properly taken by David. Caleb was a leader of the Judahites, and in Joshua chapter 14 verses 6 to 15 he was granted the territory of Hebron by Joshua. In Joshua chapter 15 verses 13 to 19 we have the same story of Axa, Caleb's daughter, that we have here.

Arthaniel captured Kiriath-sephar for Caleb and won Axa's hand. Axa's request to Caleb is one of the great land-grant narratives in the book of Joshua. She requests springs of water, and perhaps this should remind us of the connections between women and water sources in Genesis and elsewhere.

We also discover at this point that some of the descendants of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, were among them at this time. Later, the wife of one of these Kenites, Jael, will play an important part in the story. The story of Judah's possession of the land is generally positive, but they failed to take the lowland, as the inhabitants of the plain had iron chariots.

Also, while the Judahites captured Jerusalem and put it to the sword, the Benjaminites, in whose territory it lay, couldn't drive out the Jebusites who lived there. After the southern struggle for possession led by Judah, we have the northern struggle for possession led by the house of Joseph. Judah goes up first in the first attack upon the south, and then in verse 22 the house of Joseph then goes up.

Judah and Joseph were the leading tribes, as we see in the preeminence of Judah and Joseph in the blessings of Genesis chapter 49. Judah and Joseph were also formally represented by Caleb and Joshua respectively. As in the case of the conquest of Judah, this story begins with an important city.

In the former account it was Jerusalem, and this time it's Bethel or Luz. Bethel was a prominent city in the stories of Abraham and particularly of Jacob. Jacob had the vision of the ladder there and had called it Bethel at that time.

The house of Joseph spy out the city, much as the spies spied out Jericho at the beginning of the book of Joshua. They are helped by a man, whom they spare, much as the Israelites spared Rahab in Joshua. However, the stories diverge at this point.

The story of the defeat of Jericho ends with a curse upon the person who tries to rebuild the city, and with Rahab living among the Israelites. However, this story ends with the man moving to the land of the Hittites and building a city named after the original Canaanite name of the city of Bethel. This is not a promising sign.

The northern tribes are a great deal less successful in their attempts to occupy their land. While they generally dominated the Canaanites dwelling in their territories and sometimes reduced them to forced labour, they could not expel or assimilate them. In some cases we are told that the Canaanites lived among them, in others that they lived among the Canaanites.

In verse 33, for instance, the Canaanites are referred to as the inhabitants of the land. Dan has particular difficulties overcoming the Amorites and were repelled in their attempts to capture the lowland, being driven back to the hill country. The northern tribes can achieve little more than a fragile hegemony.

By the end of the chapter, the confidence with which it began has sunk and the situation of Israel looks rather bleak. Israel has failed to live up to the promise of the conquest. A question to consider.

Taking stock of the situations that the various tribes find themselves in at this point, what might have been the greatest challenges and temptations that they would have felt? Galatians chapter 3 Let me ask you only this. Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by the hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain, if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by the works of the law or by hearing with faith? Just as Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, In you shall all the nations be blessed. So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham the man of faith. For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.

For it is written, Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for the righteous shall live by faith. But the law is not of faith, rather the one who does them shall live by them.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree, so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith. To give a human example, brothers, even with a man-made covenant, no

one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, And to offsprings, referring to many, but referring to one, and to your offspring, who is Christ. This is what I mean.

The law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise, but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, and told the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.

Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not. For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

But the scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith, for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

In the previous chapter, Paul continued to emphasize the divine origin of his message, a point that he had introduced at the opening chapter of the book of Galatians. In chapter 2, he had described his confrontation with Cephas at Antioch, when he and others withdrew from fellowship with Gentiles on account of the circumcision party. Having recounted the argument that he made against Cephas at that time, at the beginning of chapter 3 he now turns to the Galatians to bring its full force to bear upon them.

He has already expressed his dismay at them in chapter 1, but now he is even more impassioned. The fact of the cross, the great truth whose force Paul has been at such pains to drive home to the Galatians when he was with them, seems to have been forgotten by them. It is in the event of the cross that the grace of God is made known, and it is in that event that lives like Paul's are completely refounded.

Out of the work of the cross flows the gift of the Spirit, yet the Galatians, having received the Spirit apart from the law, by simply hearing and believing the message of the cross, now seem to be turning away from the cross to the law. They are turning back from the new age of the Spirit to the old age of the flesh, and Paul wants to know from them

whether, in their experience, God gives the gift of the Spirit by Torah observance or by hearing the message of the cross by faith. If the blessing of the Spirit was received entirely apart from living as observant Jews, why do they think that they now need to live in this way? The gift of the Spirit is not given, according to Torah observance, but to faith, whether from Jews or Gentiles.

The apostle Peter and the other leaders had learned this lesson back in the book of Acts, in Acts 10, verses 44-48. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word, and the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, And then in Acts 11, verses 17-18, And finally in Acts 15, verses 8-11, The leaders of the apostolic church discovered that God wasn't accepting Gentiles on the basis of their becoming proselytes and living as Jews, but as Gentiles, marked out not by Torah observance, but by faith.

Now it's important for us to understand that living as a Jew wasn't something so much that people did to earn salvation. It was rather a status that they enjoyed. Part of the scandal of the cross, though, was that God's grace cut directly across the presumed status that the Jews enjoyed, and brought grace to the Gentiles on an equal footing.

And the rest of the chapter explains the logic of all of this. One can imagine the Judaizers, Paul's opponents, emphasising the importance of the law in the Old Testament narrative. They could talk about statements that Jesus had made about not abolishing the law, but fulfilling it.

They could present Torah observance as the proper shape of Christian obedience. The gift of the Torah at Sinai was the establishment of a covenant bond with the nation, and teasing covenant apart from the Torah would seem nigh impossible. It shouldn't be difficult to feel the persuasive force that such an argument might have had.

And Paul's response is to show how the grace of God in Christ, apart from the law, is fitting, not simply dispensing with the earlier story, but bringing it to an appropriate climax. Paul makes his case by providing a reading of the story, the story from Abraham onwards, one that presents his reading of the Gospel as a fitting denouement. Paul doesn't give a complete answer to the questions that might be raised here, but he does give a response that clarifies a very great deal.

He takes his starting point with the way that Abraham, the father of Israel, was marked out by faith, as one in good covenant standing with God, an event that occurred prior to circumcision or the advent of the law, way back in Genesis chapter 15 verses 4-6. And he brought him outside and said, It wasn't through Torah observance that Abraham was in good standing with God, but through belief in a promise that was given to him. Those defined by faith, rather than by Torah observance, are defined by the very same thing as

defined the father of the Jews, Abraham.

And indeed, the blessing of the Gentiles was announced in advance to Abraham, when, at his call, he was told that all of the nations would be blessed in him. Paul goes so far as to describe this as preaching the Gospel beforehand to Abraham. The Gospel is the declaration of the reign of Christ, a declaration of which an international people is an intrinsic element.

Those who are defined by faith are not just like Abraham, they are the sons of Abraham, the man of faith, and they are blessed along with him. However, by contrast with those marked out by Abraham-like faith, those who depend upon Torah observance for their standing with God are under a curse. The law held out a curse over the unfaithful.

The point of the Torah wasn't perfect spotless obedience, it made provision for atonement, but the Torah did require observance, and Israel had failed in that observance. The law considered in and of itself was never the foundation of right standing before God. Habakkuk 2, verse 4 declared that the righteous shall live by his faith.

The logic of right standing with God is one of promise and trust. But the law, however, operated according to the principle of receipt of the law and observance of it. The law had not brought Israel into the blessing of right standing with God at all.

Quite the opposite, it had brought Israel under the curse. Right standing with God had always depended upon a logic extrinsic to the law. Throughout the Old Testament itself we can see this.

Whether in sacrifice, which is a sort of enacted prayer, or in prophecy, Israel looked to something beyond the law to deliver them from the judgment that the law itself placed them under. In books like Deuteronomy, after laying out the law, Moses makes clear that the law will end up bringing its devastating curse upon Israel. It will only be through the promised intervention of God, an intervention received by faith, that Israel would be delivered from the predicament that the law brought them into.

For Paul, the cross of Christ is that which deals with the crisis of the curse of the law. It was by the cross that the Lord had redeemed Israel, not by or according to Israel's own Torah observance. Having dealt decisively with the curse of the cross, the blessing of Abraham could be given to the Gentiles, and the promise of Abraham could be received by faith.

To understand part of what Paul has in mind here, we should probably think back to the call of Abraham, and what lay in the backdrop of it, the story of Babel. The building of Babel, this great city and a tower, was an attempt to make people's name great. It was an attempt to forge a great and a powerful human solidarity, so that people would not be

scattered abroad.

It was an attempt to build a tower uniting heaven and earth. But as a result of this, the nations are divided by a curse. But then God calls this man called Abraham in the next chapter, and he promises to make Abraham's name great.

As we work through the story of Abraham, we see an alternative to the Tower of Babel. There is a ladder leading from heaven to earth, a ladder that Jacob sees at Bethel. There's also the promise of a new human solidarity, a solidarity that's formed through blessing.

If the nations were formed through a curse, there is going to be the blessing of the nations through Abraham. God is going to provide an alternative to Babel. This is the implicit promise of Abraham, and this is fulfilled by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.

That's why Paul connects the gift of the Spirit and the promise given to Abraham, because these two things belong together in a proper understanding of the story. At Pentecost, there is a conduit forged between heaven and earth. Christ ascends, and the Spirit comes down, and there's this union between heaven and earth forged.

There's a union of people from every tribe, people, tongue, and nation, as people declare in many different tongues the glorious works of God. Languages once divided at Babel are now brought together in a unified testimony to the glory of God. All of this fulfills the promise to Abraham, and the fact that this occurs, as it clearly does in the Book of Acts, without people being circumcised and observing the law, reveals that Torah observance is not the basis upon which we stand in right relationship with God.

One does not need to be a Jew to be a member of God's new people. This purpose and promise, right there at the beginning of the history of Israel, in the call of Abraham, cannot be annulled or undermined by anything that comes later. The promise was always made to Abraham and his seed, seed being singular.

The promise wasn't to a number of different families of Abraham, but to one people of Abraham, a single seed. The envisaged seed was always a Jew and Gentile reality, one in which there was no division between the two. God gave this inheritance in the form of a promise.

If God had later given the law in a way that added lots of terms and conditions and small print to the promise, it would have hollowed out and denied and negated the promise. The question then naturally arises though, what was the purpose of the law then? And Paul turns to this question in verses 19-20. For Paul, the law plays a subsidiary and temporary role.

He foregrounds the parts played by the angels and the intermediary Moses, and this downplays its finality and its character as direct divine gift. The role of the angels at

Sinai is also discussed elsewhere in the New Testament. In Acts 7:53 And in Hebrews 2:3 How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It doesn't bring about the unity that was awaited.

For Paul, this is a unity mysteriously witnessed to in the core confession of Israel's faith, the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. The law didn't bring the oneness of a united seed, a seed united in fellowship with each other and in fellowship with God.

Rather, the law was characterised by intermediation, which brings parties together while holding them apart. It did not bring about the communion with God characterised as sonship, and it also served to divide Jews from Gentiles. And there's something unfitting about a God who is one and yet has divided peoples.

The law then was more provisional. It wasn't there to set terms upon the promise. It was added because of transgressions, Paul says, an expression whose meaning is not immediately clear.

This is a statement whose meaning will probably need to be discerned from a broader acquaintance with Paul's theology. Perhaps it means that the law served to bring sin to light, to smoke it out into the open. And it achieved this by bringing righteousness to light, by silhouetting in prohibitions the form of life characteristic of the spirit.

It mostly revealed life negatively by exposing the death and the judgement that it outlined in its prohibitions. The law never could bring about the life that it revealed, and it ended up dealing curse and death to a people who could not live within its strictures. Within the tabernacle, the temple and the sacrificial system, the law did provide a structure within which God was present in a highly bounded way in the midst of a sinful people.

And it presented some way of approach, but in the process it revealed the scale of the gulf, and it could not overcome this gulf. The judgement that the law brought Israel under placed all humanity on a sort of equal footing. Even as Israel enjoyed a privileged proximity to the Lord and unique benefits as a nation formed through blessing, it ended up under the curse, like the Gentiles.

In the end, one way or another, everyone found themselves ending up under the power of sin, so that when the promise came, it could be received on equal terms too. For Israel, the law was like a guardian for a child during the period of its minority. It placed some bounds upon their sin, and it also served a teaching function.

The law came with blessings and curses, much as a child needs to be taught by external rewards or punishments. For those who meditated upon the law and delighted in it, the law served to direct them to the way of faith and love. It revealed the limits of its own

observance as a basis for standing with God, but also how it would be fulfilled in love for and faith in the gracious, promising God.

However, for most, it ended up bringing curse and a sort of imprisonment. It restricted their willfulness, but it also revealed their willfulness and placed them under punitive measures. This was all provisional though, precisely in order to prepare people for and lead to Christ.

Now, however, faith has come. Faith is the principle of a new way of life, something that flows from Christ by the work of His Spirit. By faith we have right standing with God on the foundation of grace.

And although Paul does not discuss it at this point, faith also produces a new way of life, a way of life characterised by the law of God written upon our hearts. The gift of the law at Sinai is juxtaposed with the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. One of the principal results of all of this is that we now have unity with God and unity with others, both of which the law restricted.

The law divided Jews from Gentiles and also held God and man at safe distances from each other. However, now we enjoy sonship and fellowship with God through faith, a standing received as a gracious gift through God's gift of His Son. The promised seed to Abraham is realised in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit.

While circumcision divided Jew from Greek and male from female, baptism is a sign of union. It unites us to Christ and it unites us to each other. Baptism is not miraculous, working apart from faith.

Rather, just as a wedding formally unites two people in their love and a wedding with no love is a charade, so baptism brings us into a union that is lived out in and on the basis of faith. It's not magic and it doesn't negate the necessity of faith. Rather it presents to our faith the blessings of sonship that have been given to us.

It is founded in Christ's own faithfulness in His death and resurrection and it's lived out in our answering faith. In baptism we formally enter into union with Christ. We put on Christ, as Paul puts it here.

Henceforth our very bodies, the root of ourselves, our bodies which exist prior to our agency, our volition or our subjectivity, they're defined by Christ. In baptism we are all buried with Christ so that we might be raised with Him. Baptism also unites us with all of the other people who have been baptised as a united people in the church that baptism marks out, whatever our background and whatever our identity.

In this new people, old divisions, like the divisions the Gentiles were re-erecting by turning to the law, are overcome and we all become one. Modern readers tend to read verse 28 as a statement about equality or even in some cases interchangeability and

this does not quite grasp Paul's point. Paul's point is not the equality of detached individuals with varying characteristics but a declaration of the unity of formerly opposed or alienated groups in a new solidarity.

While there are some clear senses in which a form of equality follows from this, where all recipients of the promised Holy Spirit and stand on the same ground of grace before God for instance, it is not an axiomatic equality, a radically generalisable equality, nor yet an equality that renders people interchangeable. Paul's point is not that human beings have always been equal, rather his point is relative to this event of God in Christ. Those things that would once divide us no longer define our existence and have ceased to be the barriers that they once were.

The result of all of this is not a lot of detached and equal individuals, but various and differing members of a single and undivided family. This new family in Christ is the fulfilment of the promise that was made to Abraham. A question to consider.

Paul's argument in this chapter is founded upon an extensive reading of and reflection upon the history of redemption. He isn't making general statements about an abstract way of salvation. He is rather exploring the way that God has acted in history and expressing the force of the implications that that has for the Galatians at that moment in time.

If you were challenged to retell the underlying story that Paul explores in this chapter in your own words, how would you go about doing it?