

OpenTheo

January 3rd: Jeremiah 2 & Galatians 3

January 2, 2021



Alastair Roberts

The Lord's indictment of Israel. The promise of Abraham does not come through the Torah.

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

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Jeremiah, chapter 2. The word of the Lord came to me, saying, Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the Lord. I remember the devotion of your youth, Your love as a bride, How you followed me in the wilderness, In a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, The first fruits of his harvest.

All who ate of it incurred guilt, Disaster came upon them, declares the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord, O house of Jacob, and all the clans of the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord.

What wrong did your fathers find in me, that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless? They did not say, Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in the land of deserts and pits, in the land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through,

where no man dwells? And I brought you into a plentiful land, to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. The priests did not say, Where is the Lord? Those who handle the law did not know me.

The shepherds transgressed against me. The prophets prophesied by bail, and went after things that do not profit. Therefore I still contend with you, declares the Lord, and with your children's children I will contend.

For cross to the coasts of Cyprus and see, or send to Cedar and examine with care. See if there has been such a thing. Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.

Be appalled, O heavens, at this. Be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord. For my people have committed two evils.

They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water. Is Israel a slave? Is he a home-born servant? Why then has he become a prey? The lions have roared against him. They have roared loudly.

They have made his land a waste. His cities are in ruins, without inhabitant. Moreover the men of Memphis and Tappanhes have shaved the crown of your head.

Have you not brought this upon yourself, by forsaking the Lord your God, when he led you in the way? And now, what do you gain by going to Egypt, to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria, to drink the waters of the Euphrates? Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God. The fear of me is not in you, declares the Lord God of hosts.

For long ago I broke your yoke, and burst your bonds. But you said, I will not serve. Yes, on every high hill, and under every green tree, you bowed down like a whore.

Yet I planted you a choice vine, holy of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate, and become a wild vine? Though you wash yourself with lye, and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me, declares the Lord God. How can you say, I am not unclean, I have not gone after the bales? Look at your way in the valley.

Know what you have done. A restless young camel running here and there, a wild donkey used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind, who can restrain her lust? None who seek her need weary themselves. In her month they will find her.

Keep your feet from going unshard, and your throat from thirst. But you said, it is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners, and after them I will go. As a thief is shamed when

caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed.

They, their kings, their officials, their priests, and their prophets, who say to a tree, you are my father, and to a stone, you gave me birth. For they have turned their back to me, and not their face. But in the time of their trouble they say, arise and save us.

But where are your gods that you made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you, in your time of trouble. For as many as your cities are your gods, O Judah. Why do you contend with me? You have all transgressed against me, declares the Lord.

In vain have I struck your children, they took no correction. Your own sword devoured your prophets, like a ravening lion. And you, O generation, behold the word of the Lord.

Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of thick darkness? Why then do my people say, we are free, we will come no more to you? Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number. How well you direct your course to seek love, so that even to wicked women you have taught your ways. Also on your skirts is found the lifeblood of the guiltless poor.

You did not find them breaking in, yet in spite of all these things, you say, I am innocent, surely his anger has turned from me. Behold, I will bring you to judgment for saying, I have not sinned. How much you go about changing your way.

You shall be put to shame by Egypt, as you were put to shame by Assyria. From it too you will come away, with your hands on your head. For the Lord has rejected those in whom you trust.

And you will not prosper by them. Jeremiah chapter 2 is a collection of oracles which present a comprehensive indictment of an unfaithful people. Developing various metaphors, it challenges Judah to regard its situation and its behaviour in a different light, that they might be startled into a new awareness of the severity of their apostasy.

The chapter begins with one of the most common and important images for the people of God, as the Bride of the Lord. This is an image that is frequently used in both Old and New Testaments. Here the image is used to remind Judah of the honeymoon period of the Lord's relationship with Israel.

It might seem to be in contrast to many other biblical portrayals of the Exodus generation, that in the initial departure from Egypt they are described as akin to a bride following her bridegroom in loving dependence, the Lord providing for his people in the wilderness with the manna and the water from the rock, the people responding with loving devotion or *hesed*, covenant love, a term more commonly used with reference to the Lord himself. Such covenant love was what God desired of his people more than anything else, as we see in Hosea chapter 6 verse 6, for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. Israel's loving devotion,

however, would turn out to be fickle and short-lasting.

It is possible, however, that the image here refers less to the initial departure from Egypt than it does to the period immediately prior to the entry into the land, a time at which Israel was much more faithful. The fathers of verse 5 don't appear to be either the patriarchs or the Israelites of the first wilderness generation. Rather, they are most likely the ancestors who first entered into the Promised Land.

The image of Israel as the young bride here recalls positive relations in the past. It also introduces a crucial image of Israel as the bride of the Lord who owes him her devotion. This will be explored in different directions in later oracles.

We see a similar image explored in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 8 to 14, which reads, When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil.

I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk. And I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck.

And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil.

You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God. The image of Israel as the bride of the Lord is a powerful one.

It foregrounds the deeper character of the nation's relationship with the Lord. While the law given at Sinai was a covenant, not dissimilar to the treaties of other ancient Near Eastern nations, the effective dimension of the Lord's covenant with His people is of paramount importance. The Lord desires that His people love Him with all of their heart, soul and might, reciprocating His love for them.

He isn't merely looking for their obedience. As Jacques Lumbon observes, the oracle with which the chapter begins also connects with Jeremiah's call. The youth of Jeremiah connects with the youth of Israel at her call and His holiness with Israel's holiness to the Lord.

The second part of the opening oracle introduces a different image, that of the firstfruits of a harvest. The firstfruits of Israel's harvest were devoted to the Lord as an expression

of the fact that the entirety was a gift gratefully received from His good hand. Israel herself was the firstfruits of the Lord.

We can see this in the description of Israel as the Lord's firstborn son. The firstborn son being described as the firstfruits of His Father's strength in Genesis chapter 49 verse 3 and Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 17. As Israel was brought out from Egypt, they were the firstfruits of the womb, and the firstborn sons of Israel were set apart through the Passover.

The firstborn sons were later replaced by the Levite males. These firstborn sons and later the Levite males stood for the entire nation in its status as God's firstborn. Here the language of firstfruits is more immediately connected with agricultural themes.

Israel is the dedicated nation, the firstfruits of the nations more generally. There is an implicit promise here that the Lord's purpose extended beyond Israel, comprehending the wider body of nations. Israel was to be the firstfruits of the Lord's harvest, not the only fruits.

In Revelation chapter 14 for instance, the 144,000 redeemed of Israel are described as redeemed as the firstfruits for God and the Lamb of mankind. As the Lord's firstfruits, Israel was the Lord's treasured possession, His own allotted heritage, as Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 8-9 claims. Any who threatened or sought to claim that possession for themselves were attacking what belonged to God Himself and suffered great punishment as a result.

Jeremiah's oracles have a poetic character to them and in verses 5-9 the oracle has a concentric or chiasmic or there and back again structure, with the Lord's bringing His people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land at the heart of it. The central section is flanked by statements about the failure to say where is the Lord? The next elements concern Israel's going after the Lord in the wilderness, which is described. The oracle is not merely addressed to Judah, but also to Israelites, whether in the territory of the former Northern Kingdom, some of which still remained, or living in exile.

The Lord condemns Israel, and especially their leaders, by Jeremiah for their failure to remember Him, and all that He has done for them, His deliverance of them from Egypt and His care for them in the wilderness. The Lord had brought them into a fruitful and plentiful land from the wilderness and not only had they forgotten Him, but they had defiled His land. The priests, the rulers of the people and the prophets had all failed.

At the heart of their failure was a failure of memory. In verse 2, the Lord remembered Israel's covenant love in the wilderness. However, Israel had failed to remember their corresponding honeymoon experience of their bridegroom.

Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the

wilderness, in the land of deserts and pits, in the land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that none passes through, where no man dwells? Israel did not ask that question. A central task of Israel was that of memory, of recalling the foundational narrative, a task that is repeatedly stressed in the book of Deuteronomy. They had failed in this most basic duty.

Despite Israel's great unfaithfulness and shameful forgetfulness, the Lord does not just give up on them. He will contend with them and with their children's children. He will not surrender them to their sin and rebellion.

Israel's sin is unprecedented. The Lord directs their attention west to Cyprus and east to Qadar, the land of northern Arabia, to see whether there is any other nation that has so abandoned their gods. And this is even among idolaters.

Israel, however, has exchanged the Lord, their glory, for something that does not profit. They have swapped that which set them apart from all the other nations for something less than worthless. Psalm 106 verse 20 reads, They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.

The folly and the rebellion is compounded by the gross ingratitude. Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 15 to 18 But Joshua grew fat and kicked, he grew fat, stout and sleek. Then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the rock of his salvation.

They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods. With abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded.

You were unmindful of the rock that bore you and you forgot the God who gave you birth. Paul makes a similar claim about people exchanging the glory of God for worthless idols in Romans chapter 1 verses 22 to 23 Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. God calls the heavens to bear witness to the scandalous character of Israel's apostasy.

In Deuteronomy the heavens were appointed as one of the witnesses to the covenant. Here as the sin of Israel is laid bare before them, they are expected to be appalled. This is a betrayal of the most intimate and blessed relationship.

The sin of Israel is twofold. They forsook the Lord, the fountain of living waters, the one whose grace was the source of all their life and blessing, and in his place they constructed cisterns. Indeed cisterns that were broken and hence useless.

Cisterns are holes dug in the ground to collect water, but if they aren't properly sealed, all of the water will seep out of them. Israel's hewing of broken cisterns might be a metaphor for their construction of idols with their own hands, rather than looking to the

living God. Verse 14 begins with a rhetorical question, to which the presumed answer is no.

Israel is not just a lowly born nation doomed to a bad fate, to be preyed upon by other nations. No, Israel is the bride of the Lord, Israel is the firstborn son and the heir of the Lord's own land. Israel's fate is entirely and tragically self-inflicted.

There was no reason why it had to be this way. The Lord describes the state of the land, whether in the present or the near future, laid waste by the young lions of Egypt and Babylon, whether referring to it as a past event or something about to occur. Jeremiah speaks of the Egyptians shaving the crown of Judah's head.

This might be a reference to Pharaoh Necho's killing of Josiah at Megiddo, taking Jehoahaz into captivity and appointing Eliakim as king in his place, changing his name to Jehoiakim. This all occurred on account of their forsaking of the Lord. Judah responded to their predicament by adopting a foreign policy of turning to Egypt and Assyria, who formed an anti-Babylonian coalition for aid.

However, this would ultimately prove powerless to save Judah, which would be overcome by the Babylonians. In the image of drinking of the rivers of these two nations, we might recall the earlier comparison of the Lord to living waters that Judah was replacing with hewn-out cisterns. Judah is turning to the hewn-out cisterns of its idols and to the rivers of these foreign nations, Egypt and Assyria.

But there is living water for Israel with the Lord, if they would only turn to him. Walter Brueggemann, writing about this passage, observes that in verses 20-28 there are a series of false assertions of identity from Judah. Judah has committed itself to falsehood and is living by such lies.

Commentators differ on the translation of verse 20. Craigie, Kelly and Drinkard, for instance, hold that we should understand the Lord to be the one who broke the yoke, the yoke of slavery in Egypt, so that Israel might serve him. Shamefully, ungrateful Israel refused to serve the Lord.

Lundbom, by contrast, argues that it is Israel who broke the yoke, the yoke in this case being the yoke of service to the Lord. In verses 20-22 there are three successive images of Israel's unfaithfulness and pollution. They are like an adulterous whore, promiscuously prostituting herself at every idol shrine, forsaking the Lord, their divine husband, for idols that are no gods.

They are like a choice vine of the Lord's own planting that has turned wild, producing bitter grapes. We might think here of Isaiah's indictment of Judah in his song of the vineyard in Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1-4. The third image is one of stubborn and defiling bloodstains on their clothes or body that cannot be expunged, no matter how hard they

scrub at them with lye and soap.

Their guilt clings to them before God, however they try to free themselves of it. Judah might protest her innocence, but her actions in the valley testify against her. The valley here might refer to her actions with bale of peor, as a number of older commentators argue, or perhaps to the valley of the son of Hinnom and the child's sacrifice to Molech that had occurred there.

The Lord compares Judah to a young camel that won't keep a straight course or to a wild donkey in heat, trying to catch and follow the scent of a male for the sake of copulation, nothing stopping her in her quest. Judah is like a brute beast in heat in its addiction to idolatry. It is pointless to try to restrain her or to bring her back.

Like an addict cornered in their addiction, Judah turns to excuses, claiming that they are powerless to resist the law of idolatry. The Lord declares that they will be like a thief caught in the act, openly humiliated in their idolatry, in which they have turned to fertility symbols of wood and stone. The tree was typically associated with Asherah, the fertility goddess, and the stone with her male counterpart, although they seem to be mixed in order here.

Israel has turned away from the Lord, towards the idols that they are serving, showing the Lord a sign of contempt in the process. But the Lord will put them to shame as he turns his back on them. Judah, in the time of its distress, will call to the Lord for deliverance, but will not receive it from the Lord.

Their many gods, if they are really gods, should be able to rise and save Judah. The Lord abandons them to these powerless and worthless idols. Judah accuses the Lord, but he challenges their supposed grounds for doing so.

They have transgressed, they have not responded to correction, they have killed the prophets that the Lord has sent to them. The Lord had dealt with them time after time, and they had rejected him persistently. In response to Judah's accusation, the Lord presents Judah with his own challenge.

Taking up the imagery of the opening oracles of the chapter, he asks Judah whether he, the God who led Israel through the wilderness, was himself like a wilderness and a land of darkness to Israel. The betrayal is all on Judah's side. They have treated the Lord himself as a wilderness from which they want to be delivered.

The Lord also takes up the nuptial imagery again. The virgin or the bride dresses in glorious clothing on the wedding day. This day is rich with memories, but Israel seems to have forgotten hers entirely.

They act as if they had no husband at all. The chapter ends with ironic praise for Israel and how gifted they are in their pursuit of unfaithfulness, so practiced that they could

teach the adulteresses and whores their skills. Their clothing is stained with the blood of the poor, whom they have oppressed.

Yet even when stained with innocent blood, Israel stubbornly asserts its guiltlessness. They seem to have the false impression that the passage of time has absolved them of their guilt, that the stain has faded as time has passed. But there will be a reckoning.

Very soon Egypt would put them to shame. They have put their trust in human beings to come to their aid, but those parties were themselves rejected and would be shamed. A question to consider.

What are some other places in scripture where the imagery of Israel as the bride of the Lord is explored? Galatians chapter 3. O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. 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, until 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 chapter 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, Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have, and he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ? And then in Acts chapter 11 verses 17-18, If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way, when they heard these things they fell silent, and they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.

And finally in Acts 15 verses 8-11, 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 that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will? 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. If the grace of God in the death of Christ and the gift of the Spirit is not given according to Jewish identity and Torah observance, we immediately face the question of how we are to make sense of the marking out of the Jews as the natural descendants of Abraham and the giving of the law to them.

One can imagine the Judaizers, Paul's opponents, emphasizing 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 behold the word of the Lord came to him, this man shall not be your heir, your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, look toward heaven, and number the stars if you are able to number them. Then he said to him, so shall your offspring be.

And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness. 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 You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it. And in Hebrews 2-3 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, 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 characterized by intermediation, which brings parties together while holding them apart. It did not bring about the communion with God characterized 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 judgment 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 judgment 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 characterized 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 realized 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?