

## Galatians 3:15-29

Introductory excursus: The writings of the New Testament are different from us, and so have something to teach us. Part of becoming a more powerful interpreter of scripture is surrendering the desire to make the writings say what we want them to say, or have been told they say, and to encounter them speaking for themselves. Only when we are prepared to allow them this freedom do we open our hands to receive what, in truth, we we come to the writings asking for, namely, the Word of God.

1. In verse 16 Paul continues his reinterpretation of Torah in light of his own and the first Christians' experience of Jesus Christ. Here he reinterprets Genesis 12:7, 13:15, 24:7. As he notes, the word *seed* in these referenced texts is indeed singular: *zeh'rah* in Hebrew and *sperma* in Greek. Paul enlists this detail as evidence of a deeper witness of scripture to the future coming of Jesus Christ to fulfill God's promise to Abraham. Does Paul undermine the authority of scripture by reinterpreting it in light of his experience of what God has done in Jesus?
2. Paul implicitly initiates a significant shift of emphasis on biblical figures in regard to God's promise. Relative contemporaries of his, such as the hellenized Jew Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC - c. 50 AD) wrote extensive commentaries on Scripture, in which he emphasizes Moses more centrally than Abraham as the biblical figure most associated with the promises of God. But in verses 17-22 we see Paul implicitly sidestepping Moses, and putting far more emphasis on Abraham. Paul explicitly connects Jesus with God's promise to Abraham, and Abraham's believing God, but does not connect Jesus with God's giving the law to Moses at Sinai, and Moses faithfulness in bringing the law to the people, and steadfastness in serving as their arbiter before God. Interestingly, the Gospel of Matthew and the letter to the Hebrews do make this connection, Hebrews especially.<sup>1</sup> Though we have, admittedly, only seen a small sampling of Paul's explicit use of Torah so far in our studies together, how would you begin to characterize Paul's relationship with Torah? When Torah contradicts what Paul and his fellow Christians have experienced in regard to God's power in Jesus Christ, how has Paul responded so far?

Excursus on experience and symbolic worlds. All of us live in symbolic worlds. We are actualizing our belief in the symbolic world of "Church" right now. If I show up unprepared for church on a Sunday morning, I weaken that symbolic world a little; when I show up prepared I (hopefully) strengthen it a little. This November we will all reaffirm our belief in the symbolic world of "democracy," when we cast our votes, and expect that whoever receives the majority of electoral college votes will become the new president. A Traumatic experience is an experience that violates the symbolic world we live in to the extent that we cannot go on living without responding in one of three ways. I will risk using the uncomfortable example of parental sexual abuse to make this important point. In an ideal world parents are supposed to take care of their children. If my father rapes me when I am a child, however, I am faced with a traumatic contradiction of that world, and I am tragically faced with three options. 1. I can deny the

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 3:1-6 - Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. **2** He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. **3** Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. **4** For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. **5** "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house,"<sup>[a]</sup> bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. **6** But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

experience in an attempt to save my symbolic world. 2. I can deny my symbolic world: all fathers are, deep down, rapists. Or 3. I can do the very difficult work of reinterpreting my symbolic world in light of my experience: my father raped me, he was wrong to do so, but not all fathers are like mine, and I will do everything in my power to make sure that my children, and all children I am trusted to care for, grow up in an environment of secure love and safety. The first we often call *denial*, the second *cynicism*, even *nihilism*. The third we rightfully call *resilience*.

In light of our discussion of symbolic worlds, I want to invite you to consider our relationship with scripture 1. as a matter of how scripture lives in *our* symbolic world, but also 2. As a matter of how we live in *scripture's* symbolic world. If we can do that, if we can begin to understand Paul's relationship with Torah, for instance, not simply as a matter of *loyalty* to a text, but as something constitutive of his and his fellow Jews' *symbolic world* we will come to his writings better prepared to appreciate his ongoing reinterpretation of the symbolic world of Torah in light of his and his churches' experience of a crucified, resurrected messiah.

3. How would you characterize Paul's understanding of the Law (17-25), specifically, in light of what he has experienced in Christ? What does he think it was good for in its own time?

4. Galatians 3:28 is one of the most radical social claims of the ancient world. In light of what we have come through so far in our study, how would you teach a Sunday school lesson on this passage to a group of 8-year-olds?