Get out of jail free Galatians 3:21-22

In Galatians 3:21, Paul asks whether the law is contrary to God’s promises. Looking at what he has said about the law and promise so far in this chapter, why do you think he asks this question?

Paul answers his question at the beginning of Galatians 3:21 with an emphatic, ‘Certainly not!’ and he explains his answer in a four-line chiasm, which follows an ABBA pattern:

A For if a law had been given that could give life,

B then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

B But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin,

A so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

The first two lines set out a hypothetical scenario, which did not actually take place. The last two lines explain what has actually happened instead. What was the outcome of the law being given (line 1) and how did this differ from what happened when the promise was given (line 4)? How does this contrast answer Paul’s opening question at the start of Galatians 3:21? Why do you think the law failed to give life?

In the first and last lines of this chiasm (AA), Paul contrasts law and promise. This shows that the chiasm as a whole is designed to answer the question he poses at the start of 3:21. What two opposites are contrasted in the (BB) central lines (2 and 3)? Line 2 shows what would have happened if the law had been able to give life; line 3 shows what happened because the law could not give life.

In his book, *The Truth of the Gospel*, Gerhard Ebeling explains Paul’s thought: ‘The Torah [law] is for Israel a protective fence. It prevents contact with everything unclean, which is kept outside, and it restrains the desire to break out and overstep the salutary boundary. It would almost be possible to say that Paul takes a polemical stance towards this image of the Torah as a beneficent fence by radicalising it and transforming it into its opposite. It is not the law but the sin preceding the law that must first be taken into account. And it is no longer a protective fence but a prison from which there is no escape. Within this transformed metaphor the law does not have the function of partially breaking through the walls of sin, making a breach in them to open a way of escape. On the contrary, the law has the function of an additional attendant, a prison guard who makes those who live in the custody of sin fully aware of where they are…it watches over those imprisoned in sin and keeps them in custody’ (p.194). The law does not function as a wall which protects us by keeping sin outside of our lives; instead, the law ends up imprisoning us under sin. Do you find this imagery helpful? Does it help how you to understand why the law did not bring life?

If the law imprisons us under sin, how does Christ set us free?

We have already looked at some explicit contrasts or opposites in this chiasm (lines 1 and 4, lines 2 and 3). Write these down so that you have two positives on one side of your paper, contrasting with two negatives on the other. Looking at the chiasm, what other positives can you see in this passage? Make a list of them on one side of your paper. Can you think of contrasting negatives to list opposite these? Are there negative terms that Paul uses in this passage? What would be the positive contrasts to these negatives? Try reading through Galatians 2:16-3:22: how has Paul developed some of these contrasts in his argument up to this point?

Paul talks about the promise being given to those who believe (3:22). What do you think is the content of that promise (3:8, 14, 18)? Can you trust God for it, and thank God that it is yours by faith?

‘The seat of faith is not in the brain, but in the heart, and the head is not the place to keep the promises of God, but the heart is the chest to lay them up in’ (Richard Greenham).