The coming of Christ Gal. 3.23-27

Read through the passage: what role is ascribed to the law here? Is it positive or negative?

Compare different translations of Galatians 3:24: how do they vary in terms of how they depict the law? This variation turns on how we should interpret the term that Paul uses to denote the law in this verse. Clement of Alexandria suggests that the law was given to lead the Jews to Christ, just as philosophy was given to pave the way for the Greeks to come to Christ (*Stromateis*1.5); he ascribes a positive role to the law in Galatians 3:24. On the other hand, in the Anchor Bible Commentary, Lou Martyn points out that Galatians 3:23 shows us how Paul views the law and he argues on this basis that Paul portrays the law as ‘a distinctly unfriendly and confining custodian, different in no significant way from an imprisoning jailor’ (*Galatians,* 363). How can there be two such different views of the law? Well, think about our English term ‘custody’: you can be placed in custody to come under the beneficent, protective care of a guardian, or you can go into custody and be imprisoned for a crime you have committed. The term Paul uses shares a similar ambiguity.

The context of Galatians 3:23 indicates that Martyn is probably right: for Paul, the law has a punitive function. To use an analogy from school, we should not suppose that Paul saw the law as a teacher, responsible for educating a child; the law was more like a prefect, responsible for enforcing discipline and putting pupils in detention. Try reading the passage again with this perception of the law in mind. Does it make any difference to your understanding of what Paul is saying here? Why do you think he portrays the law in such a negative light in this passage? Do you agree or disagree with the way he portrays the law here? Is there more that can and maybe should be said about the law and its purpose? Remember that Paul was not writing a handbook of systematic theology. He was doing everything in his power to oppose those teachers who were arguing that Paul’s Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and keep the Old Testament laws. This is a letter written with a specific aim in mind.

Paul also talks about the coming of faith in this passage. What difference does faith make when it comes? What do you suppose Paul means by ‘faith’ here? Why do you suppose that he talks about the coming of faith rather than the coming of Christ?

An early version of the NIV translates Galatians 3:26 as, ‘You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.’ How does the different word order found in other (better) translations affect how we understand this verse? The following verse (3:27) speaks of being baptised ‘into’ Christ and being ‘clothed’ with Christ. This is very spatial imagery: Paul talks about being ‘in’ Christ as if we are ‘in’ a set of clothes. The imagery comes from people getting changed after baptism: when they put on dry clothes, it is as if they are clothing themselves with Christ. What do you think it means for us to be ‘in’ Christ Jesus? Reflect for a few moments on the imagery of being clothed with Christ: what does that convey to you? Does it make any difference to your perception of who you are or how you should live?

Paul talks about faith and baptism in these verses. Why do you think it is important for us to get baptised when we put our trust in Christ? Can faith without baptism save us? Can baptism without faith? Can you explain why you have answered these questions in the way that you have answered them?

‘Gracious God, we thank you that you are a God slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, a God who is swift to pardon and delighting to forgive.

We praise you that you treat us not according to our deserts but according to your grace, always ready to put the past behind us and to help us to start again.

You invite us to wash and be clean, to confess our sins and receive your forgiveness; and so we come now with joy, acknowledging your grace and assured of your pardon!

(Nick Fawcett)