

Fact Sheet for **“Are Gentile Christians Abraham’s Descendants?”**
Galatians 3:15-4:7

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Helen and I had DNA tests done a couple of years ago. I turned out to be 1% Jewish in ethnicity, Helen was 9%. So, is Helen a descendant of Abraham? Am I? How do we know? Who is an offspring of Abraham anyway?

The book of Galatians is addressed to a group of largely Gentile believers who were being influenced by some who were teaching that they had to obey the Old Testament Law... or they were not really saved. In the first 2½ chapters Paul has already emphatically stated that we are saved by faith, not by obedience to the Mosaic Law. In 3:15 he continued to drive this point home with the example of Abraham.

Today’s passage (3:15-4:7) calls for a lot of explanation. So hang onto your seats. Here we go!

Read Galatians 3:15. We have a poignant example of this in Oregon... PERS.

Read Galatians 3:16a. Now pause a second to think about this. God’s promises weren’t just made to Abraham. They were also made to his offspring. The word “offspring” is literally the word “seed”, and is singular in form. It is what is called a collective noun and refers to Abraham’s descendants. Collective nouns are names for a collection or a number of people or things. Words like group, orchestra, family, and congregation are examples. And the word “promises” is plural. These promises of God to Abraham and his descendants are seen in Genesis 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 22, and 24. So, why did Paul say what he did in the second half of verse 16?

Read Galatians 3:16b. Was Paul saying that the word “offspring” or “seed” did not refer to his descendants, but only to Christ? Don’t be too hasty with your answer. The reason Paul said this is that he employed a common Jewish interpretive method of his day to illustrate that salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ.

Your interpretive method is called your hermeneutic. This strange English word comes from the Greek word for “interpret” in the story of the resurrected Christ speaking to two men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). We hold to what is called a literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic. We pay attention to grammar, word meanings, and context as we interpret Scripture. But there was a different interpretive method that was common in Paul’s day that he used here for an illustration. The thought of this interpretive method went as follows.

1. God made promises to Abraham and his descendants on the basis of belief, faith.
2. Abraham’s single most important descendant was the Messiah, Jesus Christ.
3. Therefore the promises to Abraham must be accessed through Jesus Christ.
4. The Mosaic Law, which came centuries later, does not change how these promises are accessed. They are still accessed by belief, faith.

Paul was *not* saying that the word “offspring” in the Abrahamic promises didn’t refer to Abraham’s descendants. In Romans this is quite clear (Romans 4:13, 16, 18). Instead Paul was only using that common Jewish interpretive method to illustrate that justification is by faith, not by works.

Read Galatians 3:17. Paul was referring to a well-known 430 year time frame that began not with Abraham but with the time the people of Israel lived in Egypt (Exodus 12:40). Paul's point was that the Old Testament Law came much later than the promises made to Abraham. Therefore those promises are accessed through faith, as with Abraham, not through Law obedience.

Read Galatians 3:18. This inheritance from God comes by God's promise and is accessed by faith. It does not come through the Law.

Read Galatians 3:19. The Law was given to be a means for making sin known (Romans 3:20). The intermediary is certainly Moses, but what about angels?

ESV Acts 7:53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

ESV Hebrews 2:2 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution,

Read Galatians 3:20. The promises to Abraham were given directly to him by God, without a mediator. I can't help but think of Deuteronomy 6:4 here. "The LORD is one" can also be translated "the LORD alone".

Read Galatians 3:21a & b. This is the same kind of emphatic negation found in Galatians 2:17

Read Galatians 3:21c-22. The Law made it patently clear that all are sinners! No one can achieve eternal life through obedience to the Law of Moses (Romans 3:23)! Salvation is only through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9)!

Read Galatians 3:23-25. The word "guardian" is difficult to translate as it has no exact parallel in society today. In Paul's day a guardian was a slave to whom a son was committed from roughly ages 6-12. These slaves were severe disciplinarians who guarded the children from the evils of society and gave them moral training. This was the Law's function until Christ came. And Paul will continue this imagery through the rest of today's passage.

Read Galatians 3:26-27. This is not water baptism. This happens at the moment of salvation (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Read Galatians 3:28-29. Notice that Paul has now expanded the meaning of the word "offspring" to refer now to those who have put their faith in Christ and not as a reference to Christ alone. But the emphasis is still on Christ and faith. As offspring we are now *heirs* according to promise of faith, not according to Law observance.

Read Galatians 4:1-7.

So is Helen an offspring of Abraham? Am I? Are you? Absolutely... through faith in Jesus Christ! Gentile Christians are the offspring of Abraham through faith!

Paul is clear. We are only saved through faith in Christ. But remember, Paul still had more to say in Galatians! And he will be presenting an alternative to living by the Law that all Christians should live by.