

Galatians 3:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.

Analysis

But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. The phrase 'before faith came' (pro tou elthein tēn pistin, πρὸ τοῦ ἐλθεῖν τὴν πίστιν) refers to the pre-Christian era, before Christ came and faith-righteousness was fully revealed. 'We' (hēmeis, ἡμεῖς) primarily means Jewish believers, though applicable to all. The verb 'were kept' (ephrouroumēta, ἐφρουρούμεθα)—imperfect tense, 'we were being guarded'—is a military term for garrisoning or guarding a city. The Law kept Israel under protective custody, like soldiers guarding prisoners.

'Under the law' (hypo nomon, ὑπὸ νόμου) indicates the Law's jurisdiction—Israel lived under the Law's authority and restraint. The phrase 'shut up' (synkleiomēnoi, συγκλειόμενοι)—present participle, 'being imprisoned'—intensifies the image: the Law confined Israel, preventing escape until faith arrived. The purpose: 'unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed' (eis tēn mellousan pistin apokalyphthēnai, εἰς τὴν μέλλουσαν πίστιν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι). The participle 'should afterwards be revealed' (apokalyphthēnai, ἀποκαλυφθῆναι) is aorist passive infinitive—faith was destined to be unveiled at the appointed time.

Paul portrays the Law as a temporary prison guard, holding Israel in custody until the faith-era dawned with Christ. This imagery prepares for the 'schoolmaster' metaphor in verse 24. The Law's function was custodial and preparatory, not salvific. It restrained Israel, revealed sin, and pointed forward to the coming faith-revelation in Christ.

Historical Context

The period 'before faith came' spans from Moses (ca. 1446 BC, giving of the Law) to Christ (ca. 4 BC birth, AD 30 crucifixion/resurrection). During this 1,400-year era, Israel lived 'under law'—governed by the Mosaic covenant with its commandments, sacrifices, and ceremonies. This system was temporary, serving a guardian function until 'the fullness of time' when God sent His Son (Galatians 4:4). The revelation of faith-righteousness, anticipated in the prophets (Habakkuk 2:4, quoted in Galatians 3:11), was fully unveiled in Christ's person and work.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. What does the imagery of being 'kept under the law' and 'shut up' reveal about the Law's custodial function before Christ came?
2. How does 'the faith which should afterwards be revealed' indicate that faith-righteousness in Christ was God's plan all along, not an afterthought?
3. In what ways might you be living 'under law' (under rules and regulations) rather than enjoying the freedom of 'the faith' that has been revealed in Christ?

Interlinear Text

Πρὸ τοῦ δὲ ἐλθεῖν τὴν πίστιν ὑπὸ νόμου
before G3588 But G1161 came G2064 faith G4102 under G5259 the law G3551

ἐφρουρούμεθα συγκεκλεισμένοι εἰς τὴν μέλλουσαν
we were kept G5432 shut up G4788 unto G1519 which should afterwards G3195

πίστιν ἀποκαλυφθῆναι
faith G4102 be revealed G601

Additional Cross-References

Galatians 5:18 (Word): But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

Galatians 3:19 (Word): Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.

Romans 11:32 (Parallel theme): For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.

Romans 3:19 (Word): Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.