

# By Faith? Or by Works of Law?

## Galatians 3.1-14

### Introduction

In the previous two chapters, Paul defended his authority as an apostle. Now, he begins to reason on a personal level with the Galatians who have turned away from the gospel. That the young Christians in Galatia lacked understanding can be demonstrated in their moving away from the gospel toward Jewish traditions and the Old Testament Law. By their newfound allegiance to the Law, they had, in essence, rendered the death of Jesus useless. They were now basing salvation on their own personal performance, not on Jesus Christ.

### 3.1-5: The Galatians Once Affirmed Salvation by Faith

#### Galatians 3:1-5 (CSB)

**1** You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell on you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

**2** I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard?

**3** Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh?

**4** Did you experience so much for nothing—if in fact it was for nothing?

**5** So then, does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law? Or is it by believing what you heard—

Paul metaphorically likened their departure from the gospel as having been tricked. Obviously, the Judaizing teachers did not have magical powers, but it was almost as if they had cast a spell over their hearers. How could they so quickly desert Paul's teaching? Had he not clearly preached Jesus to them? Had they not understood and believed in Jesus? Their very obedience by faith implied that they once believed salvation by works was impossible to obtain.

When the Galatians received the Spirit, did He come to them by faith or through works of merit? It should have been obvious to them that the Spirit is not received through obedience to the Law. As we read 3:2, it is important to keep in mind that *receiving the Spirit* does not necessarily mean that miraculous gifts are under

view. *Receiving the Spirit* can also refer to fellowship with the Spirit, as Christians have when they enter a relationship with Jesus.

3:2-4 contains a series of rhetorical questions where the answer is obvious. In these verses, there is an obvious and powerful contrast between the Spirit and the flesh. By rejecting the gospel, they were now seeking to be perfected through the flesh. Their relationship with Jesus had a spiritual beginning, and in 3:3 Paul wishes for them to consider how they could be perfected (made mature in Christ) through the

flesh? Strict adherence to the Law, trusting in works, attendance at ceremonies, and participation in feast days could never earn them their salvation.

In 3:4, Paul asks about persecution the Galatians had received after they became Christians. Had it all been for nothing? From whom would the persecution come? Perhaps it came from Judaizing teachers and Jews outside of Christ. It is unlikely at this early date that the persecution would have come from the Romans. Paul alluded to the fear of persecution in 6:12. While Christians should not go around looking for persecution, persecution will happen. In another epistle, Paul writes, *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*, 2 Timothy 3:12. When it comes, instead of compromising our principles to lessen or avoid it, we must stand tall. Jesus taught that a Christian could view persecution from a positive experience, Matthew 5:10-12.

3:5 could be viewed as a repeat of 3:2, only this time miraculous works is the topic at hand. When did the power to work miracles come to the Galatians? When Paul came, or after the Judaizing teachers arrived? Obviously miraculous gifts were sent to verify the message of the gospel given to them by Paul and his associates.

In summarizing the first five verses of chapter 3, we might observe that when Paul first came to them, he preached to them the genuine gospel of Christ. They believed it and were added to the body of Christ, receiving fellowship with the Spirit, 3:1-3. Their conversion to Christ led to persecution, 3:4. Because of their relationship with God, He blessed them with the ability to work miraculous gifts, 3:5. Paul urges them to recount these things, see the truth of what he presented to them, and contrast that with the falsehood spread around by the Judaizing teachers.

### 3:6-9 – Abraham justified by faith

#### Galatians 3:6-9 (CSB)

**6** just like Abraham who believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness?

**7** You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham's sons.

**8** Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed through you.

**9** Consequently, those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith.

Why look to Abraham? Abraham was the greatest hero of the Jews and many of them still claimed a biological connection to him. Because of the physical tie, Jews claimed to be of a higher spiritual class than Gentile Christians. By going to the Genesis account, Paul proves that Abraham was saved by faith – not works of the Law. In fact, the Law was not even in existence when God pronounced Abraham righteous because of his faith, Genesis 15:6. At the time of Genesis 15, the rite of circumcision had yet to be commanded, and yet God credited righteousness to Abraham.

Abraham's faith was not a one-time occurrence. It was an obedient faith over a period of time. We get glimpses into his life at 75 years old (Genesis 12), approximately

85 years old (Genesis 15), and 99 years old (Genesis 17). In each of these instances we see Abraham's

obedient faith. It is a faith (extreme trust) that is followed up by some action to do what God commands. Abraham was justified by faith. His actions were evidence of his faith, thus proving that justification was not tied to works of merit. Just as Abraham was saved through faith, so are we, 3:7. Even though we are not physical descendants, Christians have been made sons and daughters of Abraham. The covenant relationship we read about in Genesis between God and Abraham was based on faith. In 3:8-9, Paul explains that God's system of justification through faith had its origins before the foundation of the world. In fact, God's way of salvation has *never* been through works of merit. It has *always* been through faith. The case of Abraham proves it.

### 3:10-14 – Justification by Law is Impossible

#### Galatians 3:10–14 (CSB)

**10** For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, because it is written, Everyone who does not do everything written in the book of the law is cursed.

**11** Now it is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith.

**12** But the law is not based on faith; instead, the one who does these things will live by them.

**13** Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.

**14** The purpose was that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles by Christ Jesus, so that we could receive the promised Spirit through faith.

The Old Testament passage in 3:10 is from Deuteronomy 27:26. Those who did not completely obey the law were cursed because the law demands 100% compliance. No one can live perfectly by the law, Romans 3:23; James 2:10-12. God's people live by faith (3:11). We hang our entire hope on God. We trust Him in everything. The quote at the end of 3:11 is Habakkuk 2:4. The meaning behind this quote presents an attitude of steadfastness, firmness, and faithfulness in all things. Indeed, our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and His ability to purge our sin! We are sinners and trust in Him for forgiveness. Because He has forgiven us, we move forward committed to becoming more like Him, 5:22-24.

In 3:12, two systems (Law and faith) are in view and stand in direct contrast to each other. One (the law) involves perfect obedience to a code. The emphasis is dependence upon self. The other (faith) depicts a sinner in need of forgiveness. The emphasis is on trusting in Jesus. The last

phrase in the verse is a quote from Leviticus 18:5. The righteous live by faith and live. Those who cling to the Law live by it and will die by it.

3:13 teaches us that Jesus did what the Law could not do – save mankind from sin. Transgressors of the law commit sin, 1 John 3:4, and are spiritually dead, Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1. Jesus rescued sinners from this predicament (Ephesians 2:3) through the shedding of His innocent blood, 1 Peter 1:18-19. He was the *offering that turned away God's wrath*, Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2, 4:10.

By dying on the cross, Paul says that Jesus became a curse for us. He then quotes from Deuteronomy 21:22-23. When God gave the Law to Israel, it was customary in the nations to leave the body of a

condemned criminal hanging in the open for a period as a warning to impede crime. Sometimes the bodies were mutilated and damaged by people. Jewish law dictated that the body of an executed person be taken down before sunset. But, in the time between death and when the body was removed its presence was a sign that the person died under the curse from God. They had violated Divine law and had paid the ultimate price.

When Jesus died on the cross and was left suspended on the tree for a time, it was visible proof or a symbol of what He did for mankind. That is, He bore the curse for our sins. Peter writes, *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed*, 1 Peter 2:24. Jesus stood accursed in our place. He was not guilty of our sin, but He took our sins upon Himself and bore the punishment for our transgressions. His was not a death in private. It was a public occasion where He was subjected to shame, dying as the lowest criminal. We understand the fact that Jesus had to die for our sin, but we may wonder, “why the cross?” Dying on the cross is symbolic in that it demonstrates to the world the degree of God’s displeasure for sin. Sin is serious. It is an affront to the justice and righteousness of God. 3:14 explains why Jesus had to die. He died so all humankind may be saved. The blessings of Abraham come through Jesus, Ephesians 1:3. He died so that we might encounter the Spirit through our faith in Him.

## For Thought and Reflection

1. How had the Galatian Christians been bewitched?
2. From whom would the Galatian Christians receive persecution upon their obedience to the gospel?
3. Upon reflection, how would the personal experiences of the Galatian Christians have led them to see the fallacy of the Judaizing teachers?
4. Describe the stature of Abraham to the Jewish people? Why would Paul appeal to Abraham in his arguments?

5. Was the faith of Abraham a one-time occurrence? Explain.
6. Those who live under the law are obligated to do what? Prove your answer with scripture.
7. What did Jesus do that the Law could not do?
8. What is the significance of Jesus' becoming a curse for us, 3:13?