

Ministry of Grace Church

Galatians Chapter 3

Introduction

In this letter to the churches in Galatia, the Apostle Paul is facing opposition on several fronts. The most serious of which is a challenge to what the true Gospel is. Some false teachers had come from Jerusalem to the churches in Galatia and were teaching them that in addition to believing the Gospel message, they had to keep the Law of Moses and be circumcised in order to be a true Christian.

In Chapter 2 we learned again about the Jerusalem Council where that question had been settled for the church in Antioch and where a letter had been sent back to Antioch informing them that obeying the Law was not a requirement of salvation. We also learned about how the Apostle Peter let his sin nature lead him astray so that he played the hypocrite in front of Barnabas and others, causing them to separate from Gentile believers in order to not offend members of the circumcision party.

In the second chapter of Galatians we were also introduced to the theological concept of Justification. This is the act of God whereby he declares us to be as sinless as Christ the moment we believe the Gospel message. Remember that this does not involve God changing us in any way. Justification is a legal action.

By Faith or By Works

Galatians 3:1-9

¹O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ²Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— ⁶just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? ⁷Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” ⁹So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Notes:

Paul spent the better part of the first two chapters of this letter defending his authority for writing this letter. With that established, he now dives into the real doctrinal issue. In doing so, he uses some of the strongest language found in any of his letters. Here he refers to the Christians in Galatia

as “foolish.” The Greek word is *anoētos*, which literally means “someone without a mind.” He also accuses them of having been bewitched. What he meant is that they had been tricked.

Why does Paul call them “mindless” and “easily tricked?” Because when he was teaching them the truths of the Gospel, he says that he publicly portrayed Jesus as crucified. The word translated “publicly portrayed,” means “to be publicly announced and posted for all to see” as if a poster had been nailed up in a public location.

Remember, in the previous chapter, Paul said that if righteousness can be obtained by obeying the law, then Christ died in vain? Well, now he makes the point that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was indeed crucified and it was plainly announced so as to be undeniable by anyone except the most foolish and easily deceived people.

Next, Paul asks the Galatian Christians, *did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?* One of the distinctive features of Christianity is the fact that when a person becomes a Christian, he or she is immediately sealed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, (Ephesians 1:13)

No one in the Old Testament was ever indwelt by the Spirit and it does not appear that anyone in the Millennial Kingdom will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That is a privilege that belongs exclusively to Christians. I have expressed to you on several occasions in the past that I believe that Christians hold a special place in God’s eternal plan. This is but one more example. We are the only people throughout history who are indwelt by the Spirit of God. And here Paul makes a point of the fact that we can only receive the Spirit by faith. It is the presence of the indwelling Spirit that gives us the assurance and confidence that we have as the *children* of the Heavenly Father. Incidentally, Christians are the only people ever referred to as “children of God” in the Bible. Others are referred to as “God’s people,” but not as His children.

Then, Paul asks the Galatians a question that appears somewhat curious:

Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?

What suffering is he talking about? Did the Galatians suffer from persecution like the Apostle Paul did? There is no outright evidence of that. The problem here is with the translation. The Greek word translated “suffer” means “to be physically or emotionally affected by something.” When used in a bad sense, it truly refers to suffering. However, in a good sense, it means to have experienced something wonderful.” This latter use of the word appears to be how Paul is using it here. One paraphrase of this and the following verse could be:

Have you had such wonderful spiritual experiences, all to no purpose? Do these amazing works of the Spirit among you happen because of the Law, or because of faith?

The apostle then quotes the supreme Old Testament example of the Gospel message. In it, he states again what all Jews knew regarding the doctrine of Justification that we talked about in the previous chapter:

just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? (Galatians 3:6)

The real question is, what was it that Abram believed? Nearly everyone knew how the Jews revered their ancestor, Abraham. Most Jews, however, conveniently forget that he was declared righteous fifteen years *before* he was circumcised and 400 years before the Law. Let's take a look a little more carefully at what Paul is referring to here.

This event, and the events leading up to it, are described in the Book of Genesis chapters 12 through 14. At that time, God had not yet renamed Abraham, so he is referred to here by his given name, Abram. He and Lot had arrived in the Promised Land and Abram had decided that he and Lot must separate because the land could not support all the animals they had between them. Therefore, Lot moved down into the Jordan Valley and eventually moved into the city of Sodom. Unfortunately, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah had foolishly decided to stop paying tribute to a king named Chedorlaomer. As a result, he came with his forces and defeated the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, plundered them, and carried off all the people as captives.

When Abram heard the news that Lot had been taken captive, he took the men of his own household along with a couple of friends and went after Chedorlaomer, defeating him and his armies, rescuing the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and bringing them back to their homeland. Upon returning, they were met by the king of Sodom who told Abram that he could keep all of the goods that had been plundered from Sodom if he would just let him have all his people back. Abram gave him all his people and all of the goods. He refused to keep any of the spoils of war, because he did not want anyone but God to take credit for making him rich.

Afterward, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision saying, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

But Abram responded to God like a spoiled child, saying in effect:

Ha! A reward, huh? You promised me a child and have not delivered on your promise. I don't want any reward from you, just a son. Right now, the only one who will receive an inheritance from me is my servant Eleazar of Damascus.

God's response to him was, "This man will not be your heir, your very own son will be your heir." Then God took Abram outside (it was nighttime) and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then the LORD said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

This is a beautiful story and Paul used it to show that Abraham was justified because he believed God. But I ask you again, what was it that Abraham believed that resulted in his being declared righteous?

For the Galatians, the most significant fact of this event is that the law was not given until more than 400 years later. Also, notice that Abraham was not circumcised until 15 years later. Therefore, if Abraham was declared to be righteous long before the Law even existed and well before he was circumcised, then the Galatians were being mindless fools to believe that they had to believe the Gospel AND observe the law, including circumcision, in order to be saved.

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

Galatians 3:10-14

¹⁰For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

¹¹Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹²But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”

¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— ¹⁴so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Notes:

As we look at this, keep in mind that a person that God has declared as just (or righteous) is without sin in His eyes. He or she is completely innocent! Paul’s next proof is that obeying part of, or even most of, the Law not only does not help a person, it actually condemns them and declares them to be accursed! In contrast to the ones being accursed, Paul says, “the righteous (or just ones) shall live by faith.” This is a direct quotation from the prophet Habakkuk

“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4)

In this passage, God has told Habakkuk that He will judge Israel using the Babylonians, who were an unstoppable force, defeating everyone they went up against. God is also condemning the Babylonians, saying that they are arrogant. But, He says, those who are righteous (just) shall live by faith.

This passage is so significant that it is quoted three times in the New Testament. In doing so, God emphasizes three words: faith, live, and just.

In **Romans 1:17**, when Paul quoted this passage, the emphasis was on *faith*: “The just shall live by **faith**.”

In **Hebrews 10:38**, when the writer to the Hebrews quoted this same passage, the emphasis was on *live*: “The just shall **live** by faith.”

Here in **Galatians 3:11**, when Paul quoted this passage, the emphasis is on *just*: “The **just** shall live by faith.”

So you see, the significance of what Paul is teaching the Galatians is:

1. The key to life is faith, not deeds.
2. The key to justification is faith, not deeds.
3. Our righteous standing before God is based on faith, not on deeds!

The Law and the Promise

Galatians 3:15-29

¹⁵To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. ¹⁶Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his

offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. ¹⁷This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. ¹⁹Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. ²⁰Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. ²¹Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²²But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Notes:

There is enough material in these 15 verses to make several sermons. But, since time is short, I will only cover a couple of things here. First of all, what is a covenant? In short, it is an agreement made between two parties, and once it has been agreed on (ratified), it can't be changed unless both parties agree to it.

So, what covenant is Paul talking about in verse 15? Here's what we are told in Genesis 12, verses 1 through 3:

¹Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

Some people believe that there are three covenants. In reality there is only one, with three parts. The three parts of the covenant are:

- The promise of a land (Genesis 12:1)
- The promise of descendants (Genesis 12:2)
- The promise of blessing and redemption (the Messiah) (Genesis 12:3)

This was God's promise to Abraham, a promise received by faith, not by works of the Law.

Then why did God give the Law to the Jews? According to Paul, the Law was given as a temporary substitute, a necessary evil that brought everyone into subjection. It was given as a guardian to teach all that righteousness can not be achieved by human effort. But, now that faith has come (that is, faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross), there is no more need for a guardian. Therefore, there is no more need for the Law.

And – because there is no more need for the Law, Paul says:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Since, then, we are one in Christ, we are (spiritually speaking) the seed of Abraham and heirs according to the promise.

Basically, what Paul has just said is that the Law does not save, it entraps, but faith restores our freedom, and puts all people on the same level with each other, under God.

So What?

Let's take a few more minutes to look at the covenant that God made with Abram. It is as important to the message of the Old Testament as the crucifixion and resurrection are to the message of the New Testament. This covenant was originally made with Abram while he was still in Ur of the Chaldeans. Once Abram had reached the promised land, at a place called Shechem, God repeated the first part of the covenant:

Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. (Genesis 12:6-7)

The second and third parts of the covenant have to do with Abraham's seed. This is described in Genesis 15. It is the part that is referenced in the book of Galatians:

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:4-6)

These last two parts of the covenant are revisited again in Genesis chapter 22 when Abraham was told to offer Isaac on the altar as a sacrifice. After Abraham had demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice his son, God stopped him and provided a substitute (a ram caught in the thicket). Then God recounted the covenant one more time when He said:

By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice. (Genesis 22:16-18)

Now we get to the fun part. In the third chapter of Galatians, which we are looking at today, we have one of those commonly misunderstood verses in Scripture. It says:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Galatians 3:16)

Before we go any further – the word translated “offspring” is the Greek word *sperma*, which means “a seed.” The Hebrew equivalent, found in **Genesis 22:17**, is *zera*, meaning “a seed.” When used in reference to descendants, both the Greek and the Hebrew words can indicate a single individual or a collection of people.

Galatians 3:16 says that the promise was made to Abraham and his seed. Is that “seed,” as in one person, or “seed,” as in many people? The rest of the verse answers that question. It says that it refers to a single seed. And – it says that that particular seed is Christ (the Messiah). In other words, the promise that God made to Abraham, He actually made to Abraham and to the Messiah.

So, now let’s apply what we just learned to Genesis 15 verses 5 and 6, which says:

And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (**Genesis 15:4-6**)

The question we are to answer is, what did God mean when he told Abram to “count” the stars? The Hebrew word translated “count” is *saw-far*, which has two meanings. The first is “to number,” that is, “to count-up or number how many objects are in a group.” The second meaning is “to recount,” that is, “to relate a story or recite some important information.”

Several books have been written regarding the idea that the constellations in the night sky actually tell the story of the fall of mankind and the redemption provided by the Messiah. The authors believe that in Abraham’s time many people knew the story. With that in mind, let’s reread verses 5 and 6. This is a legitimate translation of the Hebrew:

And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and recount the story of the stars, if you are able to do so.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring (singular) be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Do you see it? Abraham wasn’t trying to count how many stars there are, that would have been an impossible task. Instead, Abraham was able to recite the story that is displayed in the stars which eventually led to the coming of the Messiah who would redeem all of mankind. And God said, “**So shall your offspring be.**” God just promised Abraham that one of his descendants would be the Messiah!

That’s what Abraham believed. He believed that the Messiah would be one of his descendants and that he would redeem the world. And – as a result of his faith (belief) God declared Abraham to be righteous. And today, on this side of the cross, we become God’s children when we believe that the Messiah has already come and that faith is credited to us as righteousness.

Now What?

Do you remember the quotation from Habakkuk?

... but the righteous shall live by his faith. (**Habakkuk 2:4b**)

Does this refer to you? I didn’t say, does this describe you. I said, does this refer to you. Are you one of the righteous ones? If you believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross to pay for your sins and that he rose again from the dead, then God has declared you to be righteous and this refers to you. You are one of God’s children.

Now – does this verse *describe* you? In other words, are you living by faith, or by deeds? If you are one of God’s children, then you don’t have to do anything to ensure your salvation. Perhaps your life is chaotic and it feels like God is far away and not listening to you. If God seems far away, who do you think moved? He has promised every one of His children, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” Are you walking facing God, or are you going your own direction?

God does not want to live your life for you. He wants you to live your life for Him. Listen, it doesn’t matter what kind of father your earthly father is, or has been. Your Heavenly Father loves you with a perfect love and wants you to have peace in your life. But the only way that will happen is if you completely submit to Him and trust in Him.

“The **righteous** (that’s you) will **live by faith**.”

Let’s pray.

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