

# BY FAITH OR BY WORKS

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*Galatians 3:1-9*

## Introduction:

Over the past 6 weeks we have worked our way through the first two chapters of this book of Galatians. To some extent, these chapters are really the introduction to Paul's letter, before getting into the main body of his epistle. There are several important things we have learned from this introduction.

1. The churches in Galatia are being troubled by false teachers who have come from Jerusalem and are bringing with them a "different" gospel, which Paul says is really no gospel at all. There is no other gospel than that which they had heard and received, the good news of justification by grace alone through faith alone.
2. These false teachers are trying to discredit the Apostle Paul by saying that his message is different from the other apostles and that he has no authority, since his message is only man-made, secondhand. Paul's response to that is to defend his authority and the source of his message, using historical accounts to show that his message came by direct revelation from Christ and that his gospel is, in fact, in perfect unity with the other apostles and he operated within a common mandate with the apostles in Jerusalem.
3. The message these false teachers were proclaiming was that grace alone through faith alone is not enough. They accused Paul of teaching an "easy believism" kind of gospel. They claimed that you also need to be circumcised and keep the requirements of the Law in order to truly be right with God. In fact, they seem to be saying that by ignoring or abandoning the requirements of the Law you become a "Gentile sinner" and make Christ the agent or servant of sin. Paul addressed this in our text last week (3:15-21). His response was that what these Judaizers were doing, in adding works to faith for salvation, was making the Christ's death on the cross meaningless and of no purpose. They were nullifying the grace of God. He took his stand beneath the cross of Christ, saying...read v. 21.

Well, today we come to chapter 3. Here is where we really get into the body of the letter. Up to this point, Paul has been defending his authority as an apostle and his message of the grace of God against the accusations of the Judaizers.

## Paul's Dismay

Now Paul turns from describing his authority and his message by turning to speak directly to the Galatian believers in much the same way as he addressed Peter in the confrontation at Antioch. Paul begins his attack by addressing the inconsistency and contradiction they are demonstrating in their lives.

v. 1 – "O foolish Galatians..." Paul uses this word twice in the first three verses of this chapter to describe these Galatian believers. The word used means exactly what we understand it to mean in English – unwise, not understanding, not making any sense.

Then the question, which really defines what he means by calling them foolish. "Who has bewitched you?" Paul implies that it is like someone has cast a spell over them and blinded them to the truth they knew and clearly understood. It is as though they have been hypnotized. They have lost touch with reality.

Piper draws an important implication from these words. He says:

"Don't ever forget that it is the people who don't take Christ into account who are in a dream-world. The real fairy tale is not the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, but the fantasy of godlessness. The most seriously bewitched people are those who don't believe in demons. The most deluding stupor in the world is caused by the sedative of secularism. If Christ is real, it is not his followers who are fools."

Paul is dismayed that they had so quickly lost sight of the reality of the crucifixion of Christ and all that it meant for them. The message of Christ's death had been presented so clearly that it was as though they had stood beneath the cross and had seen him suffering and dying there in their place. Once a person gets a glimpse of that sacrificial death, how can they turn away from the truth that Jesus did it all—that our salvation and justification is His work, from first to last? (Mention communion, which we will be observing later, a reminder of the cross.)

## The Five Critical Questions

In the following verses Paul asks five important questions which are all interconnected and build one upon another. They are rhetorical questions—the answers are self-evident. I want us to consider these questions as we think about the nature of Christ's sacrifice and his death on the cross. Paul's argument through this whole passage comes down to the fact that Christ is the source, the power, and the sustenance of our spiritual life. It is all about him from beginning to end.

Well, let's look at Paul's questions. Read v. 2.

- Were you saved and receive the Spirit through your own efforts or by faith? How did your life in Christ begin? How did it all start? Did you do it yourself, or receive it as a gift, by believing? The answer is obvious. Paul has already made it clear that if a person could be made righteous by keeping the Law, or through his own efforts, then Christ's sacrifice served no purpose at all. To suggest they were saved through their own efforts is to contradict the work of Christ and nullify the grace of God.
- Are you so foolish? (v. 3) Paul has already called them foolish—unthinking, lacking in understanding... Now he wants them to realize that the direction they are headed is utter foolishness. If they really examine the facts they will see that they have been fooled into believing a lie. They are not thinking clearly. They are under a spell—bewitched. This is really a leading question, introducing the next three questions, which follow up on the question of how they began their life with Christ.
- If you began life by the Spirit, can you now complete it by your own effort (perfected by the flesh?) If you were unable to satisfy God's requirements on your own at the beginning, do you think you have the power or ability to maintain your life on your own? Do you think that God has called you and saved you, and now says, you're on your own the rest of the way. From here on you have to do it yourself. Illust. – It is like being given a car to make a journey, but being told, you get one tank of fuel, and after that you have to push the car yourself. We are saved by faith and we walk by faith. Our life must be maintained by the power of the Spirit, not our own ability.

- V. 4 – was your suffering in vain? One only has to look at the book of Acts to see the cost at which these believers came to faith in Jesus Christ. Turn to Acts 13-14 – go through the account, showing the persecution that Paul and his co-workers faced. If they were persecuted and abused by the Jewish leaders in this way do you think these new believers suffered any less. The difference was they couldn't leave, like Paul and Barnabas did. They had to stay and face the opposition. Yet they were willing to suffer in order to be a part of God's family by faith. Paul says, now, are you going to go back to what was? You gave up everything to begin this journey of faith. Was that suffering for nothing?
- Fifth question – v. 5-6 – read it. Does God's work through the Spirit come about by works of the Law or by hearing with faith? In v. 2 Paul mentioned the Holy Spirit's work at the beginning of the Galatians' Christian lives; here he talks about an ongoing, day-by-day work of the Spirit. Though Paul had left these churches, and there were no other apostles present, the Holy Spirit was still present and was still working miracles in their midst. **By hearing with faith** is not only the way to start the Christian life but is also the way to continue it day by day.

Questions to which the answers are self-evident. Paul says by the use of these questions, you began your walk with God by faith. God gave you the Holy Spirit by faith. The Holy Spirit worked in your life to bring you to the truth by faith. It is impossible for you to then "take it from there" yourself. You cannot complete what the Spirit started. It has to be faith from beginning to end.

## The Example of Abraham

In vv. 6-9 Paul gives an OT example to bolster his statements regarding the importance of faith. There is no other way. And lest they think that this is a new idea, or new and different concept, that God has somehow changed things up on them, he points to the life of the patriarch, Abraham. I want to just briefly mention these verses. Let's read them – v. 6 is the conclusion of Paul's previous question: read vv. 6-9.

So what do we make of Abraham? It was Abraham who was the father of the Jewish nation. He is the one whom God called and set apart,

not only in a spiritual sense, but he was also given the physical sign of circumcision as a symbol of separation from the pagan nations. Doesn't he embody the very concept of being saved by works? It was through his descendants that God gave the Law and all of its requirements.

Yet the Bible is clear. In Gen. 15, before he was ever given the requirement of circumcision, hundreds of years before the Law was given, we read that "Abraham believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness." (Gen. 15:6)

When we then, as Gentiles, come in faith to God, we also receive the blessing of justification, being made right with God, by faith. And so we become, in a spiritual sense, children of Abraham by faith.

## **Conclusion**

As we close this morning I want to encourage you to consider carefully v. 3 – "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"

This verse is not directed to those who are yet to start the Christian life. It is written for us who began some time ago and are now in danger of trying to live the Christian life in a way that nullifies grace and leads to destruction. The point of the verse is that you must go on in the Christian life the same way you started it. Since we began by the work of the Spirit, we must go on relying on the Spirit. The essence of the Galatian heresy is the teaching that you begin the Christian life by faith, and then you grow in the Christian life by works, that is, by drawing on powers in yourself to make your contribution to salvation. A modern form of this heresy is the idea that "God helps those who help themselves." If you buy into that as a way of advancing in the Christian life, you have put works where faith belongs. That kind of attitude can produce a very rigorous morality, but it nullifies grace and removes the purpose of the cross.

What is truly important in the Christian life is not only how we start but how we end. We are saved, justified, by faith and our sanctification is also by living a life of faith, not relying on works or human effort.