

Truth for Today

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A look at the Epistle to the Galatians: Galatians 3

In January 2001 I was listening to the news and two items caught my attention. The first reported the challenge that black Americans of African descent were seeking restitution for the years when their forefathers were slaves and worked for nothing. These Americans were seeking redress through Congress and wanting compensation. I am sure we all deplore slavery although there is evidence that it still exists in a number of countries around this world. The second news item, which followed immediately after, was the purchase of twin American baby girls by a couple from England. You might say the second was different as it was about adoption. It might be adoption but it was also the exchange of money for people. Slavery is all about selling and buying people, putting people under bondage with no possibility of achieving liberty unless some kind person pays the asking price and then sets the slave free!

The chapter we are to consider is about slavery, not like the black Afro Americans some hundreds of years ago, but a religious bondage which kept people in fear of constant failure. The Jewish law and traditions was just such a system, because mankind was incapable of keeping it.

As we commence looking at chapter 3 you can feel the exasperation in the words Paul uses: "O foolish Galatians!" Paul was describing them as thoughtless. Why? The Galatians had accepted the Gospel message of salvation, had moved from their dead idols to the living God and were now those who had the Spirit of God living in them. So why move to sensual pleasing of the flesh, by accepting Jewish teaching, that Christianity needs something more. What more can be done? Christ has accomplished all at the cross. "Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth?" What kind of deception had taken place for them not to see that the truth they had received was being compromised and replaced.

The preaching of Paul and others had been so powerful that it brought before the Galatians the reality of Jesus Christ crucified among them. They had believed the true report of the Gospel message, seen in the preaching of Christ's death for them, and had trusted in Jesus. How was it possible to lose this and turn to a religion which had been demonstrated a failure. It was more than a failure, from that very religion had come those who, motivated by hate had demanded that Jesus be crucified. So they and the world had become guilty of crucifying the Lord of glory.

In verse 2 we have the first of Paul's challenges to the Galatians. "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" It is, in a sense, a rhetorical question needing no answer as its prime purpose was to stir the conscience and persuade them of the error of their ways. The Galatians could only admit in their hearts to receiving the Spirit by faith. Therefore, the unspoken accusation was; why are you involved with the law and works? Law and works cannot bring anyone near to God, or make them right with God.

The second challenging question comes in verse 3, "Are you so foolish?" (meaning unintelligent or thoughtless). This question must have been almost like a physical blow from the pages of the letter. Were they beginning to realise that their acceptance of the law and all its associated works and traditions had really been taken up hastily and without due thought. Historically, we are led to understand that the Galatians were a migrant war-faring people who came from Gaul in France and had eventually settled in Asia. Maybe they had an impetuous nature, characteristic of nations with a Latin origin.

Again Paul challenges the Galatians, "Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect (or complete) by the flesh?" Can the flesh improve on what is spiritual? Here again Paul seeks to touch the conscience and show the foolishness of their actions. The flesh is that which was natural and out of control as far as God is concerned. The flesh leads to selfishness and opposes God. Turning to accept a religious system, with all its ceremony which was the opposite to faith, was indeed foolish for these believers.

From verse 4 we understand that the acceptance of Christ as Saviour had brought about persecution and suffering. It was not unusual then, and it is still the same today, that in many countries, commitment to Christ brings physical suffering, opposition and sometimes death. Paul had suffered at the hands of many idol worshippers as he proclaimed Christ; he had also suffered from the Jews. Therefore, Paul could not really understand how the Galatians could turn and accept the teaching and practices of those who may well have been their one time persecutors. Was all that past suffering a waste of time?

Finally in this opening section of chapter 3, Paul reminds them of God who supplied the Spirit to them and worked miracles among them. Then Paul brings the challenge again, to ask whether God did this because of the works of the law or was it through the hearing of faith?

Paul having opened up their conscience and probed deeply with his rhetorical questions now brings before them the person of Abraham. Abraham was held in honour as the father of the nation of Israel, having been called out of Ur of the Chaldees to journey through the Promised Land. However, the scriptures teach us much more about Abraham; he is recognised as the great example of a man of faith. It was a promised land to Abraham. A promise from God that eventually the land would belong to Abraham. It would belong to Abraham through his descendants. The issue of faith in God was important to Abraham, and, because Abraham believed in his God, God took note and considered Abraham as being righteous before Him. Hebrews 11:8-19 tell us the unmistakable fact that Abraham was a man of faith. It was faith in God that caused Abraham to leave his home land, become a nomad and receive promises. In reality Abraham never possessed the land of promise but he believed and "waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God". The promise of an inheritance was very real to Abraham.

And so in verse 7 we have the thought of being the sons of Abraham - not by natural descent but those who by faith believe God. Therefore, when God gave the promise to Abraham that "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed", we see that the blessing was to go beyond Israel. The blessing would be on the same basis that had challenged Abraham so long ago, that of faith.

Paul, in Galatians 3:6-9, establishes the foundation that faith is the basis for God's blessing. Judaism and the law, which was falsely being set forward as an enhancement to faith, came a long time after Abraham. The law was given to demonstrate that no one could achieve blessing by their own efforts. The law proved mankind's failure time and again. In Hebrews 7 we are reminded that "the law made nothing perfect". In Romans 8 we have the clear statement, "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Paul commences from verse 10 to the end of chapter 4 to prove the uselessness of taking up the law and putting aside faith. Today, we will consider only up to the end of chapter 3. In verse 10, Paul takes up his argument about the ineffectiveness of the law to bring blessing by quoting from Deuteronomy 27:26, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." To any right thinking Christian this should have been sufficient to make clear that it was ridiculous to mix the law and its associated activities with Faith and the Spirit. Who could possibly keep all the law every moment of the day? The Lord spoke to a young man who came with the question, "What shall I DO that I may inherit eternal life?" Jesus challenged the man with the keeping of the Ten Commandments, and the man's response was, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." The Lord saw that this man was genuinely seeking real life. So the Lord said, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me."

We now discover that the possessions of this present life held a greater attraction for the man than eternal life. The cost to obtain eternal life was everything, just as the cost to make eternal life available was the total giving of the Lord Jesus of His life upon the cross. We sometimes make the greatest of decisions in life in a matter of split seconds. It is said of the man that "He was sad at this word, and went away grieved, for he had great possessions." If we think we can keep the law, then think again because it is impossible. The law was given by Moses to demonstrate to every person that God's standards cannot be kept by our own efforts. It is only faith in a finished work and the power of the Spirit of God within us that enables the Christian to live a life pleasing to God.

It was not only Abraham and the many other Old Testament saints listed in Hebrews 11 who came to understand the principle of faith for blessing. Verse 11 in our chapter states, "The just shall live by faith". This is a quotation from the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk lived in a time of great national failure and wickedness, and of God's judgement upon a nation which had turned its back on Him. In Habakkuk's letter of warning we have the gem, "The just shall live by faith". This has been true down through time. In verse 11 no one is right before God by the works of law. To be right can only be on the principle of faith - there is no other way. The law and everything associated with it is not faith. The law basically says, this do and live, but unfortunately does not give the power TO DO what the law requires. It is only by faith we receive the person of the Spirit of God living in us and that gives the ability to enable us to live rightly.

The Gospel to the Galatians had included the message that Christ had redeemed them from the curse of the law. To break the law resulted in the penalty of death. The Lord took the penalty when He went to Calvary and gave His life. However, because of His perfection and sinlessness, He bore the curse for others and not Himself. As a result God can now fully bless forever those who through faith believe in Jesus.

There were a whole range of sacrifices connected with the law system: daily to annual requirements but repeated year after year. The sacrificial system gave only temporary protection from a holy God. What is evident by looking at such chapters as Hebrews 11, is that, within the law system, lasting blessing only came about by faith. The Jews who by the law depended upon those sacrifices have been in dire straits since AD70 when the temple was destroyed and, as a result, the system of sacrifices were stopped.

So the redemptive work of Christ (verse 13), by being made a curse, was to enable the blessing of Abraham to come to the Gentiles, that in Christ we might receive the promise of the Spirit by faith. God's promises or covenants cannot be changed or replaced because of the passage of time or a change in the way God deals with Israel. The promises to Abraham are fixed until they are fulfilled. In verse 16 we are given the true meaning of the promise made to Abraham and his Seed. It might have been thought that Israel was the intended meaning of "his seed"; this is only partly true. Yes, the land was for the nation and it will still be so in a coming day. But, the One who was to make the promise true was the Seed, speaking of Christ. Christ, the descendant of Abraham, both made the promises possible and also the fact that He will inherit the land as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Verse 19 explains why the law was given. It was because of transgressions. The law highlighted failure and taught, for any who would listen, that faith not works was needed to be right with God. However, we should not assume that the law was against the promises of God. There was nothing wrong with the law; the failure is all ours. As the saying goes, "A bad workman blames his tools." If mankind had been capable of keeping the law, then righteousness could have been achieved, verse 21. But the Scripture reminds us that we are all under sin, verse 22.

Verses 23 to 25 teach that the law was a kind of tutor or school teacher until Christ comes to bring us out of the restrictions into liberty. It was to liberty that Paul's preaching had brought the Galatians before they confined themselves under the restriction of the law. Now Paul is seeking to liberate them once again by removing the influence of the wrong teachers and their teaching. Therefore, in verse 26 Paul states, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus". Being a son of God is a very distinctive blessing which is true for all believers, male and female. It is a place of privilege. As children of God, we consider the family aspect of the relationship we are brought into when we believe, but as sons we consider the issue of inheritance as heirs and co-heirs with Christ.

Before leaving this chapter we must consider the closing three verses. In verse 27 we are brought to the understanding of Christian baptism. Baptism in its teaching means very simply we "have put on Christ". Circumcision would mean we put on Judaism. The baptism of John the Baptist highlighted the need of repentance but still looked for the coming Christ. With Christianity, we have the fullness of Christ in putting on a new life altogether. I have a new nature which must express itself, by the power of the Spirit of God, to show Christ in all my words and actions. Others around should be able to see a testimony to Christ in my life. Believers put on Christ; the challenge is, Do I live out such a life?

In verse 28 we have the truth as to what we are "in Christ". National distinctions (Jew or Gentile) are no longer valid, as we are one in Christ. Peter had to learn this lesson in Acts 10 in relation to Cornelius, a Roman, being brought into blessing. Social distinctions (slave or free) are no longer valid, as we are all one in Christ. Philemon was taught this lesson by Paul with regard to his run-away slave Onesimus.

The distinctions of creation (male or female) are no longer valid, as we are one in Christ. Being in Christ continues on into eternity - the Lord reminded the disciples that in heaven there is neither marriage or giving in marriage, but in their new condition believers in heaven will be like the angels (see Matthew 22:30). However, some might raise the question that this conflicts with other scriptures where the distinctions of this life are maintained within the church. For example, church order is taught in 1 Corinthians 11. Order and organisation in Christian groups is a requirement and God gives the directions and rules of behaviour. This type of organisation is the same in society with businesses or charities. However, as individuals outside those organisations there is equality with rights which belong to each equally. So, as individual Christians we are all on equal terms with each other, the distinctions of nationality, social position or gender are no longer a disadvantage or advantage. Being in Christ reminds us that He has redeemed each one of us at exactly the same cost.

Finally, in verse 29, we are brought back to the issue of faith, sonship and inheritance. If we have trusted Christ then we are all of the same line or family, that of Abraham. Faith is the predominant factor in the life of this godly man. Those faithful promises given to Abraham by God are in measure still to be fulfilled. If Abraham looked for an inheritance then we more so - not by the law and religious observances, but solely as those, who through faith, will inherit as joint-heirs with Christ. What a joyous blessing to look forward to when we will reign with Christ!

There is an old favourite hymn which captures the teaching of this chapter:

*Free from the law, oh, happy condition!
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission,
Cursed by the law, and bruised by the fall,
Grace hath redeemed us, once for all.*

*Now are we free - there's no condemnation,
Jesus provides a perfect salvation:
"Come unto Me", oh, hear His sweet call,
Come, for He saves us, once for all.*

*"Children of God!" oh, glorious calling!
Surely His grace will keep us from falling;
Passing from death to life at His call,
Blessed salvation, once for all.*

Let us pray. Our God and Father never let us stray outside the simple Gospel message that Christ has done it all so long ago on the cross. Let me always remember that I do not need to do anything further for my salvation and blessing. My life service is now to live out my salvation and show others the freedom from sin that I now have. Let my life be an offering of thanks and praise. Amen.

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