



GALATIANS

Freedom in Christ

“It was for freedom that Christ set us free;
therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again
to the yoke of slavery.”

Galatians 5:1



A Commentary by Aaron Ferguson

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Galatians

Freedom in Christ

Purpose

To *refute* the Judaizers (saved by the Law) and to *reinforce* people of faith to freedom in Christ alone

Summary

Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia is the first of thirteen that we have from him. It followed the events surrounding his first missionary journey (*Acts 14*) and subsequent visit to Jerusalem to meet the disciples (*15*). On this journey Paul realized how stubborn the Jews were and how difficult it would be to convince them that Christ is the Savior; because of their obstinacy, Paul turned his attention to the Gentiles. While many Gentiles were saved and churches were planted, they were immediately challenged by the false doctrines of Jewish teachers (*Acts 13:45*), particularly that of adding circumcision as a requirement for salvation (*15:1*). As a result, much of Paul's work in Galatia was jeopardized. Before he could return in person, to strengthen their faith, he sent this letter.

Themes

- **Apostleship:** Because of Paul's former manner of life, that of a Law-abiding Pharisee who persecuted Christians, his role as a messenger of Christ had to be explained and defended.
- **The Law:** The Law of Moses was not a contradiction to Christ but a compliment to Christ. It prepared God's people for the need of a Savior; it was not a savior in itself.
- **Faith:** Faith alone in Christ alone is God's path to salvation; works do not work.
- **Father Abraham:** As Christians, we have a spiritual tie to the promises of God to Abraham.
- **Freedom:** Christ set us free from the Law but not from all law. We are free from the yoke of slavery but now carry His yoke, the law of love. Liberty is always accompanied with law.
- **Holy Spirit:** God's Spirit and our sinful flesh are at odds, constantly warring in our bodies.

Leading Ideas

- A distortion of the true Gospel is no gospel at all (*1:1-12*).
- No matter our former manner of life, God can use it to glorify Himself (*1:13-24*).
- The Gospel of Christ is the same for both Jews and Gentiles (*2:1-10*).
- Take a stand for the truths of the Gospel, no matter who stands in opposition (*2:11-21*).
- Having been perfected through faith, we need not pursue perfection through works (*3:1-9*).
- With the Law comes a curse, for which Christ is our only escape (*3:10-14*).
- The purpose of the Law was not to be our Savior, but to lead us to the Savior (*3:15-25*).
- As Christians, we are heirs of Abraham and of God (*3:26-29*).
- God has adopted us into His family, and, as His sons, we are His heirs (*4:1-7*).
- The "people of the flesh" will be cast out from the "people of the promise" (*4:8-31*).
- Christ gave us liberty, with only the law of love to restrain us (*5:1-15*).
- The Spirit and the flesh are at odds; their influence is evident in the fruit in our lives (*5:16-26*).
- We fulfill the Law of Christ by loving others as ourselves (*6:1-10*).
- We cannot make "a good showing" for both God and man (*6:11-18*).

Penman

The Apostle Paul

Recipients

The various churches in Galatia (central Asia Minor), including Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, which were started on Paul's first missionary journey

Date Written

Approximately 49 AD, after Paul's return from Galatia to Antioch (*Acts 14*) and before his trip to visit the Council in Jerusalem (*Acts 15*)

Key People

Paul, Peter, Barnabas, Titus, Abraham, and False Teachers

Key Verse

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery."

Galatians 5:1

“Paul is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel.”

Acts 9:15

“Set apart for Me Paul and Barnabas for the work to which I have called them...”

Acts 13:2

Work to Do?

Just as God had a specific work for the Apostle Paul to do, so also does He have work for us to do. It may not be that we plant dozens of churches, perform miracles, preach great sermons, and write thirteen books of the New Testament, but God does have something for us to accomplish, someone for us to influence for Him.

Paul wrote, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we should walk in them.” *Eph. 2:10*

In the same letter, Paul wrote, “Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then, do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

Eph. 5:15-17

God has work for us to do on earth, His work. The question is do we realize it and have we surrendered ourselves to His “mission” for us? Or are we wasting time pursuing our own agenda and ambitions?

God will use our spiritual gifts, our talents and abilities, our interests and experiences to advance His kingdom if we are available for Him to use. Sadly, most Christians are too busy checking off items on their own to-do lists and, therefore, aren’t aware of or available to do what God has for them. What about you? Are you spending your time making a living or making a difference?

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The Story Behind the Letter

An Extended Intro to Galatians

Leading Idea

Sometimes new and/or untrained *believers* can be just as problematic as *unbelievers*.

Before we consider the book (or letter) of *Galatians*, we must first consider what is going on in the background -- the author, the setting, and the purposes. Paul’s story is found in *Acts*. His letter to the Galatians falls after his First Missionary Journey (*Acts 13, 14*) and his visit to Jerusalem (*Acts 15*).

Before his first journey, we find Paul in Antioch, where the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Paul for the work to which I have called them” (*Acts 13:1-3*). To know what God intended for Paul to do, we must dig into his life’s story, specifically into his conversion. Before surrendering his life to Christ, Paul was the arch-enemy of the Church (*Acts 7:58; 8:1, 3; 9:1, 2*), harassing and hunting down Christians, imprisoning and even killing them; but, when God opened Paul’s eyes (*9:3-18*), he was given a new mission in life, “to bear His name before Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel” (*9:15*). God would use the greatest persecutor of Christianity to become the greatest propagator of Christianity (*9:19-23, 30*).

Because of the threats that Paul received in Damascus (where he was converted) he traveled back to his hometown of Tarsus. After a time, Barnabas retrieved Paul and brought him to Antioch. Though Paul did good things in Antioch (*Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3*), it was just preparation for his mission trips.

Paul’s first mission trip was with Barnabas to the island of Cyprus (*Acts 13:4-6*) and the Roman province of Galatia in Asia Minor, specifically the cities of Perga, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (*13:13-16, 32, 33, 38, 39, 42, 43*). In each of these cities, we find Paul and Barnabas entering the synagogues and waiting for a chance to speak. It is true that when we put ourselves in a position to speak for Christ, He opens doors and gives us opportunities (*13:14-16*). The sermon that Paul preached (*13:16-43*) is the backdrop for the book of *Galatians*. He used the Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets, *v.15*) to lead the Jews to Christ (*v.32, 33, 38, 39*). He reminded them that Christ has “freed them from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses” (*v.39*).

Though Paul had some success among the Jews, he also faced great opposition from them (*13:44-14:7, 20b-27*); and, it was because of their stubbornness that Paul turned from the Jews and focused on the Gentiles (*13:46, 48*). We also get some insight into other reasons for Paul’s letter to the Galatians, when we see the Jews “contradicting the things spoken by him” (*v.45*) and “stirring up the minds of the Gentiles and embittering them against Paul” (*14:2*). Thus, in *Galatians*, Paul will refute their arguments as well as establish his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ (i.e. *Galatians 1:1*).

After establishing churches in each city and appointing elders to shepherd them (*14:23*), Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and reported the good things that were happening (*v.27*). Though we are not told how soon it happened, we can assume that in a short time the new converts in Galatia were confused by competing messages. Those jealous and angry Jews in the region caused Paul’s new converts to abandon the true Gospel for lies. The primary lie that was being advanced at the time was the false notion that “unless one is circumcised he could not be saved” (*15:1*). No doubt, when Paul received news that the believers in Galatia were abandoning the faith, he was very discouraged and, thus, he quickly penned his letter. Even in his opening, Paul expressed bewilderment, “I’m amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you” (*Gal. 1:6*).

While *evangelism* is (and should be) our top priority, it must be followed with immediate *discipleship*. New and/or untrained believers can be just as problematic as unbelievers. We must follow Paul’s example and teach new converts what is true and what is false. That which is true involves what Christ has done for them, and that which is false involves what others (including themselves) cannot do. Christ is the One who sets us free; any way other than Christ will only enslave us (*Gal. 5:1*).

The Messenger & the Message

Paul's Salutation

¹“Paul, an apostle (not sent from men through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), ²and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.”

Jesus Gave Himself

Matthew 20:28; 26:39

John 10:11

Philippians 2:5-8

1 John 3:16

Sacrificed for Sin

2 Corinthians 5:19-21

Galatians 3:13

1 Peter 1:17-19; 2:24

He Rescued Us

2 Corinthians 5:17

Galatians 2:20; 3:13

Ephesians 1:7

Colossians 1:13, 14

The Gospel Was God's Plan

Matthew 26:42

John 6:38-40

Acts 2:22, 23

Romans 8:31, 32

Ephesians 1:7, 11

Hebrews 10:10

Leading Idea

Paul, the messenger, and Christ, the message, are both legitimate.

Paul typically opened his letters with a warm and lengthy greeting; however, this greeting was short and cool, perhaps because he was disappointed in how fast the people had abandoned the Gospel (v.6) and because he wanted to get to his point quickly. Whatever the reason, this brief introduction set the stage for the entire book, namely in two areas: first, Paul's authority as an apostle (v.1), and, second, the fact that salvation is by faith in Christ alone, not by following the laws of Moses (v.4). As always, the enemy loves to produce doubt in the presentation of truth, either by *compromising* the authority of the messenger or by *clouding* the message. Paul will address both issues in this letter.

Though we know today that Paul was indeed an apostle (one sent by Christ), he had to overcome many obstacles in order to convince the people of his day. First, he was not one of the original disciples, so he had not spent time with Jesus while He was here. Second, Paul was a rising star in the Pharisaic order of Judaism, the best of the best, steeped in the ways of the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law. Third, Paul (originally Saul) was once the chief persecutor of the early Church, hunting down, imprisoning, and even killing believers (i.e. Stephen). Fourth, his conversion to Christianity was extraordinary, a vision along the road to Damascus in which he claimed to have met Jesus. Therefore, for his message to be sincerely received, Paul had to work hard to establish his legitimacy as a spokesman of God. Thus, he opened his letter with an immediate defense of his apostleship (v.1), as one sent by God the Father and Christ His Son, who was raised from the dead.

Paul also included in his salutation “all the brethren who are with” him (v.2). Who are these brethren? The timing of this letter follows his first missionary journey (*Acts 14*) and visit to Jerusalem (*15*). The “brethren” could be the Christians in Antioch, his home church, or the church leaders in Jerusalem. Either way, the letter carries the weight of combined authority. It is not just the voice of Paul that is confronting and encouraging the people of Galatia but many others who follow Christ.

Furthermore, in the opening lines of this letter, Paul reminded his readers that Christ is alive, that He has been resurrected (v.1). No doubt, the Jews tried to convince the Gentiles that this was a false claim. Next, notice that Paul equated Jesus, the Son, with God the Father (v.3), another claim regarding the deity of Jesus, with which the Jews would argue. The Apostle also used a standard greeting of his – “grace and peace to you” – which is quite ironic, knowing the doctrinal confusion in the background. The Jews (often called Judaizers) argued that the Law was the avenue to salvation, while Paul purposely greeted them with the word “grace,” which is the opposite of the Law.

Perhaps the most remarkable element in Paul's salutation is how he included a mini-message on the purpose of Christ's ministry (v.4), a salvation sermon to remind his readers of the true Gospel. Notice that he included four parts of this miraculous message (five including the resurrection above, v.1):

- *He gave Himself*: Jesus' life was not taken from Him, but He willingly laid it down; because of His love for us, He voluntarily went to the cross on our behalf.
- *[He gave Himself] for our sins*: The reason that Jesus died was to pay the penalty for and break the power of sin in our lives; He was our scapegoat, our substitute, our atoning sacrifice, and because of Him, our broken relationship with God has been restored.
- *He rescued us from this present evil age*: Though we were born into the kingdom of Satan, because of Christ, we were transferred into the kingdom of light; we were ransomed and redeemed, freed from our chains and the power of evil in our lives.
- *All of this was done by the will of God the Father*: God had a plan, from the beginning, to redeem fallen man from his sin; sending Christ was His solution to our biggest problem.

Galatians 1:6-9

⁶“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you, by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel, ⁷which is really not another, only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the Gospel of Christ. ⁸But, even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! ⁹As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!”

Christ the Only Way

John 3:16; 14:6; 17:3

Acts 4:12; 10:43

Romans 3:22; 6:23

1 Timothy 2:5

Works Do Not Work

As prideful human beings, we like to be in control (or think that we are in control) of our lives, especially of our destinies. Thus, the requirements for any “afterlife” will include works, things we can do to earn “salvation.” Life, even afterlife, is a game to us, our game, and we make the rules. Therefore, it should not surprise us when all of our religions include works.

Christianity is the only religion in which salvation is not a work of man but a work of God. Life is a gift of God; He makes the rules, not us. Besides, in our fallen nature, we cannot do anything to please a holy God. We need help, and He has provided it through His perfect Son Jesus Christ. Works do not work. In the end, we will do a whole lot of work for nothing.

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Twisting the Truth

Distorting the Gospel

Leading Idea

A distortion of the true Gospel is no gospel at all.

No doubt, it had to be disappointing news for Paul to hear, when someone came and told him that the believers in Galatia (for whom he had risked so much) had deserted Christ for “another gospel” (v.6). I would liken it to a daring rescue into a foreign country to release prisoners of war, only to have them turn their backs on freedom and return to the captivity of their oppressors. Paul was amazed.

Why would anyone, who has experienced the freedom (grace) of Christ, return to the bondage of the Law (which we find out later is the message that the Galatians were deceived into believing, 5:1). Legalism is the oppressor in this case, as the Jews tried to add their traditions to the Gospel of Christ; but, as Paul pointed out, this “gospel” was really not another gospel at all (v.7), just a distortion of the one true Gospel. There is no other gospel, no other way to be saved from sin, no other way to restore the broken relationship with God, other than through Jesus Christ. Anytime something is added to the true Gospel, it becomes no gospel at all. Salvation is found in Christ alone.

Satan cannot stand the exclusivity of Christianity, that there is only one way to God, so he must confuse that truth by clouding it with “other ways.” Thus, we have today, just as they did then, the “many paths to God” message which many, unfortunately, believe. Since Satan knows that Christ is the only way to be reconciled to God, he “disturbs” that Gospel by “distorting” it (v.7), twisting it into something that it is not, so that people will miss the real meaning and message of the true Gospel. He distorts the Gospel oftentimes by adding something to it (in this case the Law of Moses), by taking something away from it, or by tweaking some aspect of it. However, by perverting true doctrine, he simply produces false doctrine, which draws people away from freedom and back into oppression.

Paul made it very clear that what he preached to the Galatians, while among them the first time, was the true Gospel, and that if anyone were to preach something different than that, he was making a grave mistake. He should even be cursed. He went so far as to offer two extreme examples, saying that even if he or an angel from heaven (v.8) should preach a different gospel (which would never happen), both should be rejected and cursed. To drive home his point, he stated this warning twice (v.9).

That warning may sound absurd, that an angel of heaven would preach a contrary gospel; but, it is important to note here that two of the most popular religions of the world – Islam and Mormonism – are “gospels” that were presented by “angels” (see the following article for more details). However, both of these religions are distortions of the true Gospel of Christ and, therefore, are just false gospels. They do not adhere to the Gospel as presented by Paul in the Bible, but these “angels” have introduced new doctrines that are contrary to biblical doctrine. If a real angel, from the God of the Bible, were to speak about Christ, he would never say anything to contradict God Himself; thus, it is safe to say that the angels who proposed Islamic and Mormon beliefs were not angels at all but demons sent to distort the truth.

Many times, in order to get people to believe his message, Satan will send someone with great credentials. Who better than an angel, right? People will listen to anything, no matter how twisted, if it is from someone whom they know, like, or trust; but, herein lies the problem. No matter what credentials a person purports, we should always practice discernment and, therefore, be on guard against false doctrine. We must always judge teachers by the Gospel, rather than judge the Gospel by them. The person does not validate the message, but rather the message validates the person. While the Law has a curse for those who fail to keep it, the Gospel has a curse for those who try to change it (William MacDonald). We must be vigilant, as Paul was, to protect the true Gospel of Christ. Do you know the gospel well enough to know when you are hearing a false gospel? You should.

“Even if an angel from heaven should preach a gospel contrary to the one I taught you, let him be accursed!”

False Gospels

Matthew 7:15-20

Matthew 24:23-27

John 3:35, 36

Galatians 1:7, 9

2 Corinthians 11:14, 15

2 Peter 3:3

1 John 4:1-4

Jude 17, 18

Messages from Angels?

Contradictions to the Gospel

Mormonism

Joseph Smith is widely known as the founder of the Mormon Church (a.k.a. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or LDS, 1820). He claimed to have had many heavenly visits, including one from an angel named Moroni. No doubt Smith’s visits and visions were demonic in nature, as his “new revelation” flies in the face of the true Gospel and sound biblical doctrine. Here are some examples:

- Mormons reject the doctrine of the Trinity
- Christ is a created being, the product of a relationship between God and one of his wives
- Christ and Satan are spirit brothers
- God was once a man, with a physical body, who achieved god status (eternal progression); therefore, we too can become gods and have celestial children to populate other planets
- Salvation is both through Christ and a series of works (i.e. witnessing)
- The Bible is inspired by God (KJV), but so are other books (i.e. the *Book of Mormon*, the *Pearl of Great Price*, and the *Doctrine and Covenants*)
- Heaven consists of three levels (celestial, telectual, terrestrial); one’s experience in the afterlife depends on his faithfulness to Mormon doctrine and his good works on earth

Islam

A man named Muhammad founded the religion of Islam. His revelations were also a result from an “angelic” visitor. Supposedly, Gabriel communicated the tenets of Islam to Muhammad, who wrote them down in the Quran. However, the god of Islam, Allah, is not the same as the God of the Bible, and the person and work of Christ are diminished considerably. Thus, Islam is a false gospel that has been communicated by a demon posing as Gabriel. Here are some examples:

- Muslims reject the Trinity by claiming that Christians worship three gods rather than one
- Christ was a prophet, a good teacher, but nothing more, certainly not the Son of God
- Muhammad is the last and greatest prophet, even eclipsing Jesus
- Salvation is achieved through works, adhering to the Five Pillars, which consist of the Creed, Prayer (5 times daily), Fasting (month of Ramadan), Charitable Giving, and a Pilgrimage (to holy city of Mecca)
- The Quran is the ultimate authority, not the Bible

False Gospels

The best way to spot counterfeit gospels is to know the real one. Here are some other questions to ask:

- What does the person say about Christ? Does it line up with the biblical portrayal?
- What are the person’s views of the Trinity, of God’s nature and character?
- Is the Bible the only authoritative Word of God, or are there other works that are added?
- Does salvation consist of faith alone in Christ alone or does it include works?
- Is there true Christian fruit exhibited in the life of the messenger?

¹⁰“Am I now seeking the favor of men or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. ¹¹For I would have you know, brethren, that the Gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. ¹²For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Bond-Servant

Genesis 26:24
Exodus 21:5, 6
Numbers 12:7
2 Samuel 7:5
Isaiah 53:11
Romans 1:1
Titus 1:1

God or Man, Which Will It Be?

A Gospel Not According to Man

Leading Idea

The Gospel is not of man but of God.

In this next section of his letter (v.10-24), Paul felt the need to defend his ministry and message. He recognized that his past still caused many people to doubt him. Thus, he proposed six arguments to support his apostleship. His first argument (v.10-12) was that the Gospel that he preached was not of man but of God.

Paul opened his first argument by posing a question (v.10) that each one of us must answer sooner or later – “Am I seeking the favor of men or of God?” Pleasing both men and God is impossible, because so many times their interests, views, and expectations oppose one another. Imagine how much time would be gained if you did not spend so much of it involved at church. Imagine how much money could be saved if you did not give it towards ministry. Imagine how much rest you could get if you did not spend your morning in prayer and Bible study. Imagine how much “fun” could be had if you did not restrain yourself with conscience. Imagine what you could watch, listen to, say, eat, and participate in, if you were not living a life to please God. What a killjoy He is! Right?

Paul said that if he were still trying to please men (he will expand on this in his testimony, v.13-24), he would not have become a bond-servant of Christ. A bond-servant is one who has willingly chosen to follow another, to become subservient, to live by his standards and expectations, to follow loyally no matter what the sacrifice to personal desires. Why would anyone do that, bind himself to another’s wishes? Simple, it is because of what Christ had done in Paul’s life that motivated him to serve Him. Likewise, it is because of what Christ has done in our lives that motivates us to live lives worthy of Him. When we consider how gracious He’s been and how unworthy we are, giving ourselves to bond-service is no sacrifice at all. We do it willingly for the One who gave His life for us.

Next, Paul pointed out that the Gospel of Christ is not “according to man.” In other words, the Gospel is not man-centered; the ideas, concepts, and means are contrary to what man would contrive, if he were to develop a gospel of his own. For example, man’s gospel would never identify him as a fallen creature, a sinner in need of salvation. If he did admit that he was a sinner, his means of redemption would be through human works (i.e. following laws or traditions). Salvation would be achieved by him and not God. Another man-centered concept is that there are many paths to salvation, not just one. The exclusivity of Christianity flies in the face of pleasing men; instead, it makes men angry. It is because of these ideas (and more) that Christianity, the Gospel of Christ, cannot be of man but of God.

To support the fact that the Gospel that Paul preached was not of man, he shared the source of his knowledge. It was not himself, but rather he “received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” A revelation refers to something that was previously unknown but that was made known through personal communication. That communication came in the form of a radical experience on the road to Damascus, of which Paul shared in the following testimony. It also came in the form of time spent with Christ in training (v.17). Paul made it as clear as he could that his ministry and message were not of men; in light of his argument, it is true that any “gospel” that is man-centered is not of God.

I can’t help but walk away from this passage without asking myself a question. Am I living my life to please men, myself, or God? It seems clear to me that every decision that I make is an opportunity to serve one of these three people. It is also clear to me that if I choose not to live life to please others, I will become quite different than the world around me. I will stand out, which is what God desires for me or anyone who follows Him. I want to be a God-pleaser, not a man-pleaser. I don’t care what others think of me, as long as they can see that I am a sold-out servant of Almighty God.

¹³ “You have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; ¹⁴ and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. ¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart, even from my mother’s womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal His Son in me, so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but, I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then, three years later, I went up to Jerusalem, to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But, I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord’s brother. ²⁰ Now, in what I am writing to you, I assure you, before God, that I am not lying. ²¹ Then, I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; ²³ but only, they kept hearing, ‘He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.’ ²⁴ And they were glorifying God because of me.”

Our Former Manner of Life

Paul Defends His Conversion & Apostleship

Leading Idea

No matter our former manner of life, God can use it to glorify Himself.

Paul continued in this passage (v.13-24) explaining what he started in the previous passage (v.10-12), that his apostleship and message were not of man but of God. His first of six arguments was that the Gospel that he preached came from direct revelation (v.12); it was not a gospel that he made up or one that he was taught by someone else, but rather he received the Gospel from Christ Himself.

Next, Paul shared his personal testimony, the story of how he came to know Christ. To begin, he introduced his second argument, that what he preached was in direct conflict with his training as a zealous Judaizer (v.13, 14). It was not because Paul was ignorant of the Jewish laws and traditions that he left them out of the Gospel message, but rather it was because those things had no part in the Gospel message that he left them out.

Before considering the next argument for the Gospel, we must stop here and consider Paul’s “former manner of life” (v.13). He acknowledged that his activities were shameful; he went so far as to persecute Christians and even destroy the Church itself. While it is safe to say that most people will never pursue a course like Paul’s, we can say that in our former manner of life, we said, did, and believed foolish things. Thanks be to God that He is gracious and that He saved us from our former manner of life. It should be evident that there is a clear transition between our saved and unsaved lives, a change in course, purpose, desires, tendencies, thoughts, words, and actions (v.23).

We should also be encouraged that God’s grace can even change the heart of someone like Paul. No one is beyond the reach of God’s love, and, thus, we should never give up praying, hoping, or witnessing to someone whom we think is unreachable.

Notice that Paul, when telling his story, pointed to God’s work in his salvation (v.15). He made it clear that his redemption was not by his own means but through God’s grace and in God’s timing. He also referred to God’s call on his life from birth, that he was set apart for the purpose of preaching to the Gentiles. Preaching to non-Jews was revolutionary at this time (*Acts 9:15; Galatians 3:28*), once again evidence that the Gospel was not of man, for no Jew would dare reach out to Gentiles and extend to them this precious gift.

The third argument that Paul made, to prove that the Gospel was not of man’s making, was that he “did not consult with flesh and blood” after his salvation experience (v.16, 17). In other words, after his conversion, Paul did not confer with the disciples, other apostles, or any other human leaders, but rather he first spent time independently with Christ (Arabia, fell between *Acts 9:25, 26*). Like Moses and David, Paul spent some time in seclusion and training in the desert, possibly to confirm his own calling and to affirm his faith in God.

His fourth argument for the fact that his Gospel message was of God and not of man was that the time he spent with Peter (Cephas) and James was minimal (v.18, 19). Paul only made their acquaintance, he says; he did not spend enough time with them for official training in Gospel doctrine. [Note: Paul’s last two arguments for the legitimacy of the Gospel come in the next section.]

Paul had spent so much time away from people that they did not recognize him when they saw him (v.21, 22). He was “unknown by sight.” However, everyone had heard that his life had been radically changed; instead of a persecutor of the faith, he was now “preaching the faith” (v.23). As a result, they “glorified God because of him” (v.24). I find this verse quite challenging. Do others see and hear a difference in me, and do they glorify God because of what He is doing in my life? I hope so.

¹“Then, after an interval of 14 years, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. ²It was because of a revelation that I went up; and, I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. ³But, not even Titus, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. ⁴But, it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ, in order to bring us into bondage. ⁵But, we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you. ⁶But, from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) contributed nothing to me. ⁷On the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised, ⁸for He who effectually worked for Peter effectually worked for me, ⁹and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. ¹⁰They only asked us to remember the poor – the very thing I also was eager to do.”

Same Team

Paul Goes to Jerusalem

Leading Idea

The Gospel of Christ is the same for both Jews and Gentiles.

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Thus far, Paul has offered four arguments to support the legitimacy of his apostleship and message. First, he pointed out that the Gospel that he preached was not (and could not be) of man, but it was from God (1:10-12); it was a result of direct revelation. Second, Paul was preaching in direct conflict with his training as a zealot (1:13, 14). Third, Paul made sure that the Galatians knew that he did not “consult with flesh and blood” immediately after his conversion (1:16, 17). Fourth, Paul reminded his readers that the time that he had spent with the other apostles was minimal (1:18, 19), not enough for formal training in the ways of the Gospel. In this passage, Paul provided his fifth argument.

Here, Paul wrote about his trip to Jerusalem, to meet with the leading disciples (Peter and John) and James, the brother of Jesus (who had risen to leadership in the early church). The purpose for Paul’s visit was to verify with them the Gospel that he had been preaching, to make sure that they were on the same page (this is perhaps the same visit as mentioned in *Acts 15:1-22*). Note that Paul went because of a revelation (v.2), not because he was sent by the Jews to straighten out his doctrine.

The presence of Barnabas and Titus on this trip (v.1) was very important to the outcome. Barnabas, the great encourager, had witnessed Paul’s incredible conversion and subsequent ministry. More than anyone, he could testify to the power of the Gospel as preached through Paul. However, while Barnabas was a Jew, Titus was not. He was a Greek, a Gentile, who had not been circumcised (part of the Jewish Law), but who had still been saved in Christ. He stood by Paul as a testimony of the liberating work of Christ in salvation, apart from the legalism of Jewish traditions.

Paul described the meeting that they had, with the other apostles, as a private one. Out of respect for their leadership, Paul did not want to argue with them (in case it was necessary) in front of other believers. It was not that he was unsure of the Gospel that he had preached, but that he wanted to confirm that all of the apostles were in agreement, that the Gospel could go forth with one voice. It is always wise (respect, loyalty) to appeal or confront influential leaders in private and not in public.

Next in this passage is a confusing few verses (v.3-5). Paul referred to “false brethren” who had sneaked into the church to spy on them. Who were these men? While Paul gave no indication, it seems that he was referring to Jews in Antioch, who were Christian by name, but who were leading people astray, by holding the Law over their heads (particularly circumcision) as a prerequisite to be saved. But, as Paul wrote, not even Titus was convinced to be circumcised by them (v.3); he was satisfied that Christ alone was enough for his salvation; nothing else was needed. It is perhaps because of these men of Antioch that Paul felt compelled to travel to Jerusalem and consult with the other apostles.

Whatever the purpose for going to see Peter, James, and John, it is apparent that their efforts were not in vain. Nothing these men had to say “contributed anything to Paul” (v.6), meaning that Paul’s version of the Gospel lacked nothing. What he had been taught by Christ was, indeed, the true Gospel. The same Spirit, who worked in Peter, also worked in Paul (v.8). In fact, Paul made it very clear that he did not view himself as inferior to these men at all, but rather as equals (v.6, 9). Thus, Paul, Barnabas, and Titus left Jerusalem with “the right hand of fellowship” and the support they needed (fifth argument). The last point Paul used to support his ministry is found in the next passage.

Before leaving, Paul was exhorted to remember the poor (v.10, probably those in Jerusalem). Paul did care for them, even raising money from churches to be sent to them (*Acts 11:29, 30*).

¹¹ “When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² Prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with Gentiles, but when they came, he withdrew and held himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. ¹³ The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away. ¹⁴ When I saw that they were not [up front] about the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’ ¹⁵ We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; ¹⁶ but, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ, since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified, ¹⁷ if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we have been found sinners, is Christ a minister of sin? May it never be! ¹⁸ If I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove to be a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the Law, I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. ²¹ I don’t nullify the grace of God; if righteousness comes through the Law, Christ died needlessly.’”

No Compromise with the Gospel

Paul Confronts Peter

Leading Idea

Take a stand for the truths of the Gospel, no matter who stands in opposition.

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

Thus far in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he has offered five arguments to defend his apostleship and message. In this passage (2:11-21), he provided his sixth and final argument, the fact that he confronted and rebuked Peter, the chief apostle of the early church. Paul knew, without a doubt, that what he was teaching was truth, according to Christ, and he believed so strongly that it was the true Gospel that he would not even allow Peter (Cephas), another apostle, to confuse it.

What happened exactly? Peter, whom God had already challenged in regards to his view of the Gentiles (*Acts 10, 11*), reverted to his old ways. He (and all Jews) had once regarded Gentiles (non-Jews) as unclean, yet, God convinced him that they were not unclean, but that they needed the Gospel too. Though it was difficult for Peter to accept, he abandoned the Jewish dietary laws to fellowship with Gentiles (v.12); however, when he was in Antioch, and there were Jews visiting from Jerusalem, Peter slipped back into his old self and ate with the Jews, for fear of his countrymen. This decision communicated to the Gentiles that they were second-class Christians in his book, a terrible act of hypocrisy that led several others astray, including the beloved and faithful Barnabas (v.13).

I am impressed by Paul’s courage here, to call out one of the “big hitters” in the Church and confront his error in public (v.14). Paul has already shared that he was no longer a people-pleaser (1:10), and here we see that he was telling the truth. A people-pleaser would have said nothing in an effort to please Peter by protecting his and others’ reputation. However, Paul is a God-pleaser, and God-pleasers stand for truth (His Word and Gospel) no matter who opposes them. [Note: Peter was not infallible as the Catholics claim; he was a sinner like the rest of us, who erred just as we do.]

Is opposing someone or pointing out his faults in public a good idea? Should Paul have confronted Peter privately, as Jesus instructed (*Matthew 18*)? Paul was careful to meet with the apostles in Jerusalem in private (2:2); why now was he confronting Peter in public? Paul was not ignoring Jesus’ command, to confront someone in private; rather he was protecting the Gospel, which had been offended in public. Peter’s actions were not a personal offense to Paul, rather they were an offense that impacted the local church at Antioch, even leading many astray. Thus, since Peter’s offense was public and had huge ramifications, Paul did the right thing and addressed it publically. It is quite possible, that if Paul would have let this hypocrisy pass without saying anything, that the people who witnessed the infraction might never have been together again. Someone in that group might have left that church, never to return, and would have always believed what Peter did was right. Thus, Paul took advantage of this moment as a teaching opportunity and met the challenge head on.

It is difficult to discern where Paul’s admonition to Peter ends and his instruction to the Galatians begins. He overlaps the two quite well, so I will treat the entire passage as both. Paul made some very strong statements that I will put into my own words. First (v.14), if we, as Christians, live like the world, then, how will we ever convince the worldly to live for Christ? Second (v.15-17), if we call ourselves Christians and, yet, drag Him into our sins (i.e. Law-keeping), we are suggesting that Christ condones our sins. May it never be! Third (v.18), if I have said with my mouth that salvation comes through Christ and, yet, live in such a way that salvation comes through works, then, I am a hypocrite (transgressor). Fourth (v.19, 20), no one can follow the Law; it condemns us by revealing our sin and need for Christ. Finally, if I believe that salvation comes through works, then I am suggesting that Christ’s ministry, death, and resurrection were useless (v.21). Each of these points merits a great deal more detail and inspection, but Paul will expand these thoughts in the remainder of his letter.

Faith or Foolishness?

Five Critical Questions

¹“You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus

Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

²This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the 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? ⁵So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you do it by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith?”

Receiving the Spirit

Romans 8:9

1 Corinthians 2:12; 3:16

1 Corinthians 12:13

1 John 3:24; 4:13

Leading Idea

Having been perfected through faith in Christ, we need not pursue perfection through works.

Now that he has spent the first two chapters of his letter defending his apostleship and message, Paul turns to the problem – the fact that the Galatians have been fooled by false teachers (Judaizers) into thinking that salvation comes through the Law and not by faith in Christ. His first strategy to oppose this heresy was to remind the Galatians of their own salvation experience. To do this, Paul posed five rhetorical questions.

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Christ was crucified? (v.1)

Paul’s statement here is strong, calling the Galatians “fools”; however, in his defense, when one is fooled (bewitched, tricked, duped, or deceived), the proper term for the actions of that person is “foolishness” (undiscerning, naïve, or ignorant). I believe that Paul knew exactly who was behind the bewitching (the Judaizers), but he wanted the Galatians to see just how dumb it was to fall for such deception. He had made it so clear to them that Christ was crucified for their sins, and that He was the only One who could redeem them from their fallen state. To betray the only hope they had for salvation and believe that works could somehow save them was, indeed, foolish.

Did you receive the Spirit by works or by faith? (v.2)

Here is a question that Paul himself will answer (v.3, *having begun by the Spirit*). He simply pointed out that after years of pursuing the Law, God’s Spirit never indwelt them; it was not until they heard the Gospel of Christ and believed it by faith that His Spirit took residence in them.

Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected in the flesh? (v.3)

Once again, Paul is making a point by asking a question. The point is this – since the Christian life was initialized by the work of the Holy Spirit (opening our spiritual eyes, awakening our hearts to Christ, and providing the faith to believe in Him), it must be carried on in the Spirit. In other words, since salvation is supplied by Christ through the Spirit, living the Christian life is also supplied by the Spirit. To say it another way, since salvation did not come to us by works, why would we pursue works alone to earn a good standing with God? Salvation was a work of the Spirit, so then sanctification (growing in Christ) must also be a work of the Spirit and not a trophy of the flesh.

Did you suffer so many things in vain? (v.4)

Evidently, the Galatians endured a great deal of hostility for believing in Christ for salvation. No doubt, the same Judaizers that were preaching to the Galatians were also persecuting them. Paul simply asked why they would suffer so much for Christ only to return to the works of the Law. Such a thing, in his mind, would be to suffer in vain.

Does He who provides the spirit and miracles do so because of works or faith? (v.5)

Finally, Paul asked a similar question as before. Do miracles happen as a result of obedience to the Law (works) or by the power of the Holy Spirit (faith)? Again, Paul asked and answered his own question. Obedience to the Law awarded the Jews nothing, while faith in Christ awarded them the power of the Spirit in their lives, which was made evident through all kinds of miracles.

When I read these five questions, I am judgmental of the Galatians, at first; but, after reflection, I realize that oftentimes I am guilty of their foolishness. Having been justified before God, by faith in Christ, I regularly attempt to justify myself before Him through the things I do. Somehow, I believe that carrying out my Christian duties or fulfilling my obligations earns a good standing with the Lord, when Christ has already earned my good standing with Him. Christ died to set me free from that kind of thinking, that kind of living. Why would I be so foolish as to rely upon my work and not His?

⁶“Even so, Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.
⁷Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. ⁸The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations will be blessed in you.” ⁹So then, those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.”

Faith Alone

Romans 3:28
Romans 4:3-5, 13, 14
Romans 5:1
Galatians 3:24
Ephesians 2:8, 9
1 Peter 1:5

Abraham the Believer

The Gospel before the Law

Leading Idea

Abraham was reckoned as righteous, not for obeying the Law but by believing God through faith.

Paul continues his assault on the false idea that salvation comes by obedience to the Law rather than through faith in Christ. Jewish teachers, known as Judaizers, had misled the Galatians, confused them, and convinced them to mix Christian and Jewish doctrine. The result had been a watered down version of the Gospel, which is, in essence, a false gospel.

Paul has already challenged the Galatians to remember their salvation experience (v.1-5), when they received the Spirit not by the Law but by faith. Now, he targeted a sacred stronghold of Judaism – Father Abraham (v.6-9). No doubt, Paul’s words were painful for any Jew to read. Abraham was their most cherished forefather; for anyone to meddle with his legacy was like walking into a mine field. Thus, one begins to understand why Paul was perfect for this role; his training in the Law and his background with the Pharisees qualified him, more than anyone else, to be able to speak into this area.

Furthermore, Paul was a brilliant tactician in the field of argument; he used one of the Jews’ primary weapons against them. No doubt Abraham’s circumcision was employed by the Jews as strong support for their requiring Christians to be circumcised, but Paul rendered this weapon useless, and, instead, enlisted Abraham as support of the Gospel. How did he accomplish this task?

First, Paul pointed out that Abraham was “reckoned by God as righteous” (v.6), not for obeying the Law, but by believing God through faith (*Romans 4:3-5, 13, 14*). Abraham did nothing to achieve righteousness. He simply believed God; that’s all, no works.

Second, Paul made it clear that Abraham preceded the Law and, yet, was still justified by God (v.8a). The Mosaic Law came much later; and, yet, Abraham was reckoned as righteous. Somehow, no doubt through the power of the Holy Spirit, who revealed this knowledge to him, Paul understood that Abraham’s receiving righteousness by faith, apart from the Law, was an Old Testament picture of the Gospel. Thus, Abraham should not be used as support for the Law but as support for the Gospel.

Third, Abraham was reckoned as righteous (*Genesis 15:6*) before being circumcised (*17:10, 11; Romans 4:9-12*). Circumcision, which later became part of the Law, only marked Abraham as a “believer”; circumcision did not make him a believer. Therefore, although he is technically the “father” of the Jews, Abraham could not be used as support that only those who are circumcised can be saved or “reckoned as righteous.” Clearly, Abraham’s example is one of salvation before circumcision. His works (circumcision) followed his faith; they were not prerequisites for his faith.

Fourth, when Abraham believed God, he was a Gentile (pagan), not a Jew. Ouch! This fact hurt his Jewish readers. God foreshadowed the salvation of the Gentiles through Abraham (v.8). Technically, Abraham is our spiritual forefather (v.7, 14), just as much as he is the Jews’ national forefather. Therefore, it was prophesied of Abraham that through him “all the nations would be blessed” (v.8b). When we sing the song about “Father Abraham, who had many sons; I am one of them and so are you,” it is true. All men, Jews (nationally) and Gentiles (spiritually) are included in his family tree.

In my opinion, this passage is the most important stretch of Scripture so far in this letter. In it, Paul answered a vital question – how were people in the Old Testament saved, before Christ’s advent? Simple, just like you and me – by faith. Those before Jesus believed God by faith in the Messiah who was to come (seed, *Genesis 3:15*), while we who live after Jesus put our faith in what He has already done. Both groups, Old and New Testament, are saved in the same way. So then, what was the purpose of the Law? Paul will give us the answer to that question next.

Galatians 3:10-14

¹⁰ “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written ‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them.’ ¹¹Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for ‘the righteous man shall live by faith.’ ¹²However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, ‘He who practices them shall live by them.’ ¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ – ¹⁴in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”

Jesus Became a Curse For Us

Romans 3:25; 4:25; 8:3
2 Corinthians 5:21
Hebrews 9:28
1 Peter 2:24; 3:18

The Curse of the Law

Christ the Only Escape

Leading Idea

With the Law comes a curse, for which Christ is our only escape.

Now that Paul has dealt with the subject of Abraham (v.6-9), using his legacy against the Judaizers, who used him in support of their false doctrines, he set his sights on the ineffectiveness of the Law. Taking away Abraham as one of the pillars of Judaism would have been offensive enough to enlist a host of enemies, but when Paul attacked the Law as a means of salvation, he marked himself as “enemy number one.” Once again, we can see the providential picking of Paul as the man for this job; his remarkable background prepared him, like none other, for this moment, and his courageous leadership was unmatched in taking on the primary threat to the Gospel at that time.

Some Judaizers outright rejected Christ as the Son of God and, therefore, did not receive Him as the Savior who was sent to redeem them from their sins. Those teachers were easier to spot and avoid. However, the Judaizers that had infiltrated the churches in Galatia were “half-breeds,” Jews who had married Christianity with Judaism, accepting that Christ had paid part of their penalty for sin but not all of it; the other half of their sin was covered by their obedience to the Law, namely the act of circumcision. These teachers were deceiving and dangerous.

Paul pointed out that anyone who attempted to justify himself by keeping the Law is under a curse (v.10). The only way to please God and stand before Him justified, as having no sin, is to be able to follow every stipulation of His Law; otherwise, by breaking His Law, even one part of it (*James 2:10*), man is cursed to die (*Deut. 27:26*). However, because of our fallen nature, following God’s Law perfectly is impossible. Therefore, all men are cursed to die, because all men are sinners. Thus, the only hope that man has to be justified before God and to avoid the curse of the Law is through faith in Christ (v.11). Pursuing the Law and practicing faith are contradictory paths, for anyone who pursues the Law must live with its consequences (v.12), which is spiritual death with no pardon.

Christ, then, is the only answer for men, the only escape from the judgment or curse of the Law (v.13a). Because we are under the curse of the Law (meaning that we fall short of God’s standards of righteousness), we are not able to stand before Him justified or pleasing in His sight. Therefore, another way had to be found for sinful men to be made holy. The only way that God allowed was for a substitution to be made, His Son for our sin. Thus, Christ, though sinless and able to fulfill every stipulation of the Law, became the curse for us and died our death on the cross (v.13b). Praise God for sending Christ, for without Him, we had no way to escape the curse of the Law or God’s judgment.

Not only is Christ our escape from the curse of the Law, He was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants (*Genesis 12:1-3*). It was said that through Abraham would come a blessing to all the people of the earth; Christ is that blessing, and all people, through faith in Him, can be justified before God and receive His Spirit (*Isaiah 44:3*). Once again, Paul connected Abraham and Christ, who have a stronger tie than Abraham does to the Jewish Law. Thus, Paul’s reasoning was sound and his argument air tight. Though it must have been difficult to hear (or read), Abraham had more in common with Gentiles than Jews (v.14). Praise God that He had a plan for all the peoples of the earth and not just the Jews. In time, they too will understand these things and come to believe in Christ, their only escape from the curse of the Law.

It is natural, after thinking on these things, to ponder the purpose of the Law anyway. If it did nothing but curse all men, then why give it to them in the first place? Paul will breach this subject in his next passage. In God’s sovereignty, all things are purposeful, even the Law, even its curse.

Galatians 3:15-18

¹⁵ “Brethren, I speak in human relations, even though it is only a man’s covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. ¹⁶Now, the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is Christ. ¹⁷What I am saying is this: the Law, which came 430 years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. ¹⁸For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.”

Other Promises Given to Abraham

Genesis 12:1-3, 7
Genesis 13:16; 15:5, 18
Genesis 22:16-18
Genesis 26:3, 4
Genesis 28:13, 14

Conflict of Covenants?

Abraham v. Sinai

Leading Idea

The giving of the Law neither nullified nor added to the promises of God to Abraham.

As he has for the entire chapter (3:1-14), Paul continues to make a case for the role of Abraham in the Gospel of Christ. He has already argued that Abraham was reckoned as righteous because of his faith, before the Law ever came into existence (v.6-9). He has also argued that those who practice the Law are under a curse, from which Christ is the only escape (v.10-14). Now, Paul heads off a possible retort from the Judaizers, the idea that the covenant forged at Sinai (Law of Moses) nullified the covenant made with Abraham. Is there a conflict here? Not at all, as Paul will spell out for us.

First, the apostle pointed out, regarding human contracts, wills, or covenants, that no one can dismiss them, break them, or add conditions to them once they are agreed upon (v.15). Human covenants are binding and must be carried out to completion. Therefore, if human agreements are so significant, then how much more significant would a covenant with God be? Should it be broken or added to? Absolutely not!

Since God’s covenant cannot be broken and His promises are true and always carried out in time, the promises that were given to Abraham will be fulfilled. Although many promises were made to Abraham (see note in margin), the particular promise to which Paul referred is regarding “the Seed.” What or who is this “seed” that Paul mentioned (v.16)?

After Adam and Eve’s disappointing decision to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit, sin infiltrated and corrupts everything. Man was doomed to die and suffer God’s wrath; however, there was hope. God promised Eve that her seed would redeem mankind by destroying the serpent (Satan, *Genesis 3:15*). In this prophecy, we have the first glimpse of the Gospel, that God would restore mankind through a special seed, the Chosen One. However, we are not told who that seed was, and, thus, the entire Old Testament is a long-awaited search for the Seed. Several prophets are given vague descriptions of the Seed, but no one is given full disclosure until He came to the manger.

The Seed was promised to be one of the descendants of Abraham (*Genesis 22:18*). Oftentimes, “seed” can be translated as plural (offspring or descendants), but Paul, by the revelation of the Spirit, points out that it was referring to a singular person, namely Christ. Of course, the difficult part of Abraham’s experience is the fact that here he was promised descendants when he had no children, for his wife was barren. Also, when Isaac was born, whom he thought perhaps was the Seed, God asked him to sacrifice him at Mt. Moriah. It was because Abraham had faith in God that it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Paul’s point in referring to the promise of the Seed was to affirm it, despite the coming of the Law, 430 years later (*Exodus 12:40*). The fact that Paul mentioned this point insinuates that the Judaizers might have used the Law as a way to nullify the promises made to Abraham. However, God’s covenant with Abraham did not become void simply because of the covenant made at Sinai, nor was the Sinai covenant (Law) an addition to Abraham’s covenant. The Law was an interim period, with its own purposes (which Paul will explain next), but the Law’s arrival did not contradict God’s previous agreement with Abraham. The Abrahamic Covenant was “ratified by God” (v.17), meaning that it was approved by God alone (*Genesis 15:7-17*); Abraham was only the recipient (v.18). The covenant had no conditions and it could not be broken; it was going to be fulfilled no matter what. Case closed.

Once again, Paul slammed the door in the face of those who held the Law to be superior to the Abrahamic covenant. However, the Law had proven to be inferior and ineffective. Thus, the question becomes why the Law? Paul tackled this difficult question next (v.19-29).

Galatians 3:19-25

¹⁹ “Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. ²⁰Now a mediator is not for one party only, whereas God is only one. ²¹Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then, righteousness would indeed have been based on law. ²²But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. ²⁴Therefore, the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.”

Enslaved to Sin

“Both Jews and [Gentiles] are under sin, as it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one...’ We know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; by the works of the Law, no flesh will be justified, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ... Where then is the boasting? It is excluded.”

Romans 3

Aaron Ferguson
www.biay.org

The Tutor

Purpose of the Law

Leading Idea

The purpose of the Law was not to be our Savior, but to lead us to the Savior.

So far in his letter to the Galatians, Paul has demonstrated the superiority of Abraham’s covenant over the Sinai Covenant or the Law (*Exodus 19*). The Gospel was promised to come from Abraham’s descendants; through his family “all of the world would be blessed” (*Genesis 12:3*). So then, the question that Paul must address now is why the Law? If God never meant for the Law to make men right with Him, then why did He give it? Answering this question is the purpose of this passage.

The first reason for God’s giving of the Law was “because of transgressions” (v.19). His second reason was that it was given “until the seed would come.” Notice that Paul says that the Law was only temporary in nature, until something better could replace it – Abraham’s Seed (the Chosen One, Messiah, Christ). Therefore, in light of this truth, several implications could be made about the Law:

- God provided the Law (specifically the ceremonial laws) to give His people a way to see the seriousness of their sin (transgressions), that is, through the sacrificial system.
- God provided the Law (specifically the civil laws and moral laws) to restrain Israel’s sinfulness by revealing His expectations for their nation.
- God provided the Law to show His people that their sin violated a written law and, thus, pricked their conscience; one could point to a law when a transgression was committed.
- God provided the Law to demonstrate man’s sinfulness; he is incapable of meeting God’s expectations, pleasing Him continually, and, therefore, needs a Savior to redeem him.

Although we are not given any details, note (v.19) that the Bible teaches that angels were present at the giving of the Law (*Deut. 33:2; Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2*). Paul also wrote that the Law was given through “the agency of a mediator” – Moses (*Lev. 26:46; Deut. 5:5; John 1:17*). However, Paul’s next comments are very interesting: “A mediator is not for one party only, but God is only one” (v.20). When the Sinai Covenant was made, Moses was the mediator between God and the people; but when the Abrahamic Covenant was struck (*Gen. 15*), God ratified it Himself, so that its fulfillment depended on Him and not man. Once again the Abrahamic Covenant was superior to the Law.

Paul’s next question makes sense. Once he has demonstrated that the Law was only temporary and that the Abrahamic promise would last forever, he asks if “the Law was contrary to God’s promises” (v.21). “May it never be!” he wrote. God’s purposes, although confusing to us, would never contradict each other; rather, everything that God does works together for His purposes. The Law and the Promise are not contradictory but complimentary; they work together to achieve the end goal – to point all to the Seed when He comes.

To believe that the Law could “give life” or impart salvation (right standing with God) would be a contradictory view to the coming Seed. There would be no need for the Messiah to come, if the Law could save men without Him (v.21). However, a complimentary view is that the Law and the Seed work together to achieve God’s purposes (v.22-25). How is that so? Paul wrote that “everyone was shut up (imprisoned, enslaved) under the Law” until the promised Seed could come and release us from bondage. It would be faith in Christ that would set us free from the prison of the Law.

Since God ordained both the Law and the Promise of the Seed, then it would make no sense for them to work against each other. God ordained both to work together, ultimately to lead all people to believe in the only One who could redeem us from the oppression of the Law – Jesus Christ. The Law was to be a “tutor” (school master) to guide us to the true source of salvation – the Promised Seed. It makes sense, does it not, that man must recognize his sin first before he realizes his need for a Savior.

Galatians 3:26-29

²⁶“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.”

One Baptism

1 Corinthians 12:12-14
Ephesians 4:4-6

Sons of Abraham, Sons of God

Heirs to the Promise

Leading Idea

As Christians, we are heirs of Abraham and of God.

Paul, the Apostle, having just completed a lengthy argument proving the superiority of the Abrahamic Covenant over the Sinai Covenant (Law), now begins to explain the benefits of being under the Abrahamic Covenant, which, of course, includes Jesus Christ. Up to that point in history, the Jews claimed exclusively to be “sons of God,” because they were of the Chosen Nation (Abrahamic Covenant) and they were bound by Mosaic Law (Sinai Covenant). Everyone else (Gentiles) was considered the sons of the devil. In this passage, Paul will dispel this sort of false thinking, having already revealed that it was God’s intention all along to include Gentiles in His redemptive plan.

Therefore, Paul began by stating that “all of you are sons of God” (v.26), which would have been no surprise to them. The surprise came as Paul added “sons of God through faith in Christ.” Since the Law did not redeem anyone, as Paul articulated in the previous passage (v.1-25), then the Law could not make anyone a “son of God.” It was (and is) by faith, not by works, that people become sons of God, and it is particularly faith in Christ’s ability to redeem man.

Two side comments need to be made here. First, the term “sons of God” is not a discriminatory remark against females. Females are included in this phrase as well. So then, why didn’t Paul use the term “sons and daughters of Christ”? In the Jewish culture, as the males were the leaders of their families (God’s intention), the males were the natural heirs of their father’s resources (wealth, land, and belongings). Females in that culture did not receive any inheritance because they were taken care of by males in marriage. Thus, it would not have made any sense for Paul to say, you are “daughters of God,” because daughters received no material benefits from their fathers. Sons, however, received an inheritance from their fathers; therefore, for Paul to write that “all of you are sons of God” was to say that even female Christians will benefit from the inheritance of God through Christ. Thus, the term “sons of God” is an elevation of females, not a discrimination against them.

The second side note that should be made here is that we are all “sons of God” with a little “S” not a big “S.” The Mormons claim that those who believe in Christ will become “Christs” themselves, “Sons of God,” big “S.” Paul did not intend that at all. We, as creatures, cannot and will not become Creators; we, as mere human beings, fallen in nature, cannot and will not become gods. Though we will receive the righteousness of Christ, we will not be equal to Christ. That is a false doctrine.

Next, Paul mentioned baptism (v.27); however, he referred to our spiritual baptism “into Christ,” not our physical baptism by water. Those who believe in Christ by faith are “baptized into Christ” spiritually, plunged into His righteousness and, therefore, cleansed from all sin. Paul even described it as being “clothed with Christ”; as one would put on a uniform and identify himself with a team, a business, or a military, we have a new identity in Christ our Savior.

As a result of our new “clothes,” uniform, or identity, we have Christ in common with other believers. Though each believer may be different in appearance, personality, gender, nationality, occupation, etc., we all relate to each other as Christians. All distinctions and barriers are broken down in Him (v.28). Of course, Paul was not saying that we lose our differences or distinctions (for example, we are still male and female) but that we are united in Christ. We can enjoy unity with other believers although we exhibit great diversity. It is not that Paul was commending sameness but oneness (*Ephesians 2:11-22*).

Finally, Paul brought his point to a conclusion – those who believe in Christ by faith are the true sons of Abraham, who also believed God by faith. Thus, as Christians, we are Abraham’s true descendants, his promised heirs, through faith and not by law. We are heirs of Abraham and heirs of God.

Galatians 4:1-7

¹“Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave, although he is the owner of everything, ²but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. ³So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world, ⁴but when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. ⁶Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ ⁷Therefore, you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

God Sent Forth His Son

*John 3:16; 5:30, 36, 37
John 6:39, 44, 57
John 8:16, 18, 42
John 12:49
John 17:21, 25; 20:21*

Jesus and the Law

*John 8:46
2 Corinthians 5:21
Hebrews 4:15; 7:26
1 Peter 2:22
1 John 3:5*

Divine Adoption

Sons Not Slaves

Leading Idea

God has adopted believers into His “family,” and, as His “sons” we are His heirs.

In the previous passage (3:26-29), Paul explained that if believers in Christ were “sons of God,” then they were also heirs of God. Next, the Apostle shared more details as to what it means to be an heir. Since we were not born as children of God (but children of the devil), Paul explained that we are adopted into His family; however, even as adopted children, we are still given a wonderful inheritance.

First, Paul used the analogy of a child (v.1) who was counting the days until he received his inheritance; although he would one day “own everything,” he received nothing until the proper time. In fact, he was kept under “guardians and managers,” much like a slave (v.2). Then, Paul compared us to slaves, who were once “held in bondage under the elemental things of this world” (v.3). The word “elemental” here denotes that we were once given to the lowly even backward ideas of man, simple, primitive, worldly desires that our enemy employs to keep us focused on temporal foolish things and distracted from more important eternal things. However, praise the Lord that He set us free from this enslavement by sending Christ.

Much could be said about the fact that God sent forth His Son “when the fullness of time came” (v.4). Since God does nothing randomly or haphazardly but, instead, He does all things with purpose and intentionality, then it would be true that the timing of Christ’s coming was perfect. Why did Christ come when He did (during the Roman Empire, the period of the “Pax Romana” or Roman peace, during the reigns of Caesar Augustus, Herod the Great, Caiaphas, etc.)? Why did He come the way that He did (as a baby, in a manger, the virgin birth, angels, shepherds, wise men, etc.)? Why did He come where He did (to Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth, Galilee, etc.)? We can only speculate as to the timing, but we can be sure that Christ entered upon the world’s stage when all was providentially prepared and when the moment was most advantageous.

Paul also noted (v.4) that Jesus was “born of a woman” and “born under the Law,” two critical points to understand. First, Jesus was divine, the Son of God, yet He was also human, born of a woman, a difficult mystery to understand (called the Hypostatic Union). He had to represent both deity and humanity in order to be a suited mediator between God and man (*1 Timothy 2:5, 6*). If Christ were only divine, then He could not have related to us as humans; however, if Christ were only human, then He would have been just like us, a sinner unable to relate to God.

Just as important as being born of a woman, Jesus had to be “born under the Law” (v.4). It was the Law that cursed men, for they could not keep it. The Law represented God’s expectations (particularly the Moral Law or Ten Commandments), His standards for righteousness, unto which no man was able to attain. Jesus had to be born into this system, so that He could fulfill the Law Himself and, then, rescue man from the Law. Because of His sinless life, He broke the curse of the Law for us, and then He extended to us the opportunity to be saved from that curse by believing in Him through faith. I love the word “redeemed” here; it means to be “purchased, exchanged,” which Jesus did on the cross, His innocent life for our guilty one. Jesus, the Son of God, became a son of man, so that we, who are sons of men, might become sons of God. What a wonderful exchange!

Because God has purchased us, we are His adopted children, and as children, we are His heirs (v.7). What exactly have we inherited? Much of what we have inherited we do not know or see yet (*Romans 8:23-25*), but we do know some of the things that we have received. One immediate inheritance is the Spirit of God in our hearts (*8:14-17*). He has given the Spirit to us for many reasons (which Paul will explain later), but, first, to confirm our adoption (v.6, note the mention of the Trinity). Because of His Spirit in us, we can now relate to God as our Father (Abba), who provides all things for His children.

Galatians 4:8-20

⁸“When you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods; ⁹but, now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved again? ¹⁰You observe days and months and seasons and years. ¹¹I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. ¹²I beg of you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. ¹³You know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; ¹⁴and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. ¹⁵Where, then, is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me, ¹⁶so have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? ¹⁷They eagerly seek you, but not commendably; they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them. ¹⁸It is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you. ¹⁹My children, with whom I am again in labor, until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰I wish that I could be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.”

The Sense of Blessing

Let Us Not Forget

Leading Idea

Let us not forsake the One True God for the worthless gods of this world.

Thus far, Paul has spent much of his letter making a case that Christianity is superior to Judaism, that the New Covenant was not a competitor to the Old Covenant but a completion of it. Now, he returns to the same rhetoric that he used at the outset (1:6), stating his bewilderment of the fact that the Galatians have already abandoned the Gospel to follow again the Mosaic Law. In this passage (4:8-20), Paul will again voice his astonishment of the people, then, he will share his affection for the people.

First, he reminded the Galatians that the gods that they worshiped before Christ were not really gods at all (v.8). Only one true God exists, therefore, every other god is an idol, a false god made of wood, stone, metal, or man’s imagination (i.e. Greek and Roman deities). All of these gods are void of power or value, simply a waste of time (v.9). Why would they focus their attention on created things when the Creator Himself desires to have a relationship with them? Why would they forsake the God of all power and majesty “to be enslaved again for the weak and worthless things” of this fallen world?

Notice that Paul pointed out that Christianity is a relationship with God, not the observance of a set of rules. He described it as “knowing God and being known by God” (v.9). Christianity is not a works-based religion but a personal one; yet, the Galatians, after discovering these truths, abandoned the freedom they found in Christ to return to the rigorous, burdensome regulations (i.e. of Judaism), “observing days, months, seasons, and years” (v.10). Paul then expressed his sincere hope that he had not wasted his time in Galatia, “laboring in vain” (v.11), but pled with the people there to “become like him” (free from Jewish bondage to law), as he had “become like them” (v.12, practically Gentile).

Next, Paul referred to the “bodily illness” that he experienced while with the Galatians (v.13). We know very little of this experience, but we can deduce a few things. First, his condition provided an opportunity to preach to them. Second, it was a trial for people to watch or hear him (v.14). Third, Paul may have had an eye problem (v.15b). Finally, the people must have treated Paul graciously (v.12, 14).

Perhaps the hardest hitting question in this passage is when Paul asked, “Where is that sense of blessing you had?” (v.15). Evidently, when Paul preached to them, God had afforded the Galatians an incredible moment, when their eyes and hearts were opened to the truth, when they understood and believed who Jesus was, when they accepted Him by faith and received the Holy Spirit, and when they experienced the incredible joy of complete forgiveness and inexplicable joy of being made right in the eyes of God. All believers experience something similar to that “sense of blessing,” but it is a shame how soon we forget it. When was the last time I truly sensed the joy of my salvation. Unfortunately, the worries of this world often preoccupy my mind and distract my attention away from remembering the overwhelming freedom and exhilaration that I have found in Christ.

Next, Paul pointed out that the Judaizers did not approach or appeal to the Galatians in a “commendable manner” (v.18) but rather used games and guilt trips to “win them over” to their ideology (v.17). Anyone who has to use such gimmicks to persuade others to join them is selling a lie. When Paul was with them, he sought after the Galatians in sincerity and truth (v.18), not by conniving or coercion. As Christians, we should never shame someone into following Christ, but rather we should present Him clearly, appealing to conscience, and allowing the Holy Spirit to convict. Salvation is never our doing anyway; we are but the messenger, while God does all the work.

Finally, Paul restated his frustration (v.20), possibly sensing a bit of guilt himself for writing such a strong letter. However, he had such high expectations for the Galatians, expressing to them God’s hope for all believers – that they would be conformed to the image of Christ (v.19; Rom. 8:29).

Galatians 4:21-31

²¹“Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. ²³The son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh and the son by the free woman through the promise. ²⁴This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. ²⁵Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. ²⁷For it is written, ‘Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; break forth and shout you who are not in labor; for more numerous are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband.’ ²⁸You, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say? Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be as an heir with the son of the free woman.’ ³¹So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.”

Bond or Free Woman?

The People of Isaac and Ishmael

Leading Idea

The “people of the flesh” will be cast out from the “people of the promise.”

As a Jew, the Apostle Paul was very familiar with the Law (*Torah*, or first five books of the Bible, v.21), the first book, *Genesis*, and the history of Abraham, as all Jews were (and still are); he chose to use an account from that time as an illustration to show the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. The story to which he referred is that of Abraham’s two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, by two women, Hagar and Sarah (*Genesis 16, 17, 21*). When Abraham was told by God that he would become the father of many nations and, yet, knew that his wife Sarah was barren, he arranged to have a son through Sarah’s Egyptian hand-maiden (slave), Hagar. Although the plan “worked” (Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, “according to the flesh”), it was not Abraham’s best decision. God would miraculously open Sarah’s womb and allow her to give birth to Isaac, the promised son, in her old age (v.22, 23). Just as Abraham was the father of many nations, so would Sarah be the mother of many nations (v.27).

Although the situation was quite awkward, as it is anytime that we run ahead of the Lord and force His will our way, Paul used it as a picture of the Gospel in the Old Testament. These women represented two covenants, he wrote (v.24); the Old Covenant of the Law was pictured in Ishmael, who was born of the slave Hagar (bondwoman), while the New Covenant was pictured in Isaac, who was born of Sarah, a free woman. Paul linked Hagar to Mount Sinai, where the Israelites received the Law (v.25), and to the current Jerusalem, which was still enslaved to that same law (Judaizers). Then, Paul linked the “Jerusalem above” – that is heaven – to Sarah’s children, who are free (v.26). She is the “mother” of the New Covenant in Christ; His followers are free from the curse of the Law, the Old Covenant. Just as Sarah was made to be fruitful with children, so will heaven be full of “children” (v.27).

However, just as there was a plot twist in the story of Ishmael and Isaac, so will there be a plot twist in the story of the Old and New Covenants. The Bible says that Ishmael was a wild, untamed character who snubbed and persecuted Isaac (v.28, 29); and, as a result, God commanded Abraham to cast him and his mother out of the camp (v.30), for they did not belong with the “People of the Promise.” Likewise, the Judaizers (pictured in Ishmael) ran roughshod over the Christians (pictured in Isaac) in the early church, despising and persecuting them (Paul was chief in this at first). Yet, the “children of the bondwoman” have no place with the “children of the promise,” and, therefore, God will separate the two. In other words, the slaves of the Law (Judaizers) will have no place in heaven, for they have no place in Christ, who was (and is) the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

When I read of illustrations like this from the Apostle Paul, I am amazed at the insight he was given into the history and purpose of the accounts in the Old Testament. I understand that he was a scholar of the Scriptures, the model student of the books of Moses, and perhaps the greatest Pharisee there ever was; however, I must also believe that Paul did not understand the allegorical aspects of these stories until he was converted to Christianity. How did he who was steeped in the Law suddenly see the shortcomings of the Old Covenant and, ultimately, recognize the superiority of New Covenant? These insights did not come by his own doing, but by revelation from God Himself. Perhaps Paul learned these truths from his time spent with Christ in the desert (*1:15-18*). We are not sure, but it is obvious that God had done a great work in Paul’s life and used his knowledge of the Scriptures to argue for Christianity and persuade the “children of the bondwoman” to see their need for Christ.

While I am no expert of the Bible, I long to know the deeper hidden truths in Scripture; yet, no amount of study “in the flesh” can reveal them to me. Only through God’s Spirit can these truths be discovered; for if the Spirit of God inspired the words of the Bible, then the Spirit of God holds the keys to understanding them. May I ever seek to hear from the Spirit to discover and understand the manifold mysteries of our faith.

Galatians 5:1-15

¹It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. ²If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³Every man who receives circumcision is under obligation to keep the whole Law. ⁴You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law. You have fallen from grace. ⁵For we, through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. ⁷You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. ⁹A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. ¹⁰I have confidence in you that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. ¹¹If I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. ¹²I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves. ¹³You were called to freedom; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the Law is fulfilled in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed.

Liberty with Law

Freedom in Christ

Leading Idea

Christ gave us liberty, with only the law of love to restrain us.

[Note: I have edited this passage, without altering its meaning, to make it fit the space in the margin.]

In the last half of Chapter 4, the Apostle Paul used an illustration from the Old Testament (Sarah and Hagar) to demonstrate the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old. As Christians, he wrote, "We are not children of the bond woman (Hagar), but children of the free woman" (4:31). He continues this theme. Now that we are free in Christ, why would we subject ourselves to slavery again by keeping the Law, namely through circumcision? Christ died to deliver us from the Law (5:1).

Paul included some strong warnings to anyone trying to justify himself through works, particularly the act of circumcision (v.2-4). Bear in mind that there is nothing wrong with circumcision itself, except when it is used as a requirement for salvation, for salvation through works is no salvation at all. Therefore, Paul wrote that "Christ would be of no benefit" to the one trying to justify himself through the Law. Christ is sufficient alone to save one from sin, but when anything is added to Christ as a requirement for salvation, one is no longer trusting in Christ alone but in works. To add to Christ is to take away from Christ, to diminish His sufficiency as a complete Savior.

Furthermore, Paul pointed out that the Law had to be taken as a whole or not taken at all. A person was not at liberty to pick and choose parts of the Law to follow and parts to ignore. Thus, when one requires circumcision for salvation, he is committing another error. He must fulfill the entire Law, which no man, other than Christ, can do. One must choose the Law or Christ, but cannot choose both. To choose the Law is to be "severed" or separated from Christ; to choose Christ is to be separated from the Law. Christ plus anything equals nothing, while Christ alone is everything.

When Paul used the phrase "fallen from grace," he was not implying that a believer can lose his salvation. Rather he was implying that one who combines Christ and the Law for salvation is forfeiting the benefits of Christ. One cannot embrace the grace found in Christ while holding onto the Law. Salvation is entirely a work of God through faith in Christ; our righteousness is found in Him. By His Spirit, He is perfecting us in this life and will complete that perfection in the life to come (v.5, 6).

Next, Paul hammered the Galatians again for abandoning the truths that he taught them (v.7-12). Whoever was hindering them was not an agent of Christ but an agent of the enemy. He warned that if the "leaven" was not dealt with, it would leaven the entire congregation. Paul even suggested how he would deal with such men – "I wish that those who are troubling you would mutilate themselves," meaning cut off or crush their male parts. He pointed out that he was persecuted because he is preaching Christ alone, which Satan hates; if he were preaching the Law, the persecution would stop.

Finally (v.13-15), Paul addressed a question that is often raised against Christianity – if Christians are freed from all sin, then, what keeps them from doing whatever they want? If they are not under the Law, then what is it that restrains their sinful behavior? People often confuse freedom or liberty with license or unrestraint. With all liberty there is law; a society that lives with no restraints will descend into chaos and be consumed (v.15). For example, no one is free to take another person's life; natural law forbids it. But, aren't Christians free from the Law? Yes, Christ fulfilled the law for us, but we now are restrained by His law, the law of love. "Love your neighbor as yourself." We were set free from the yoke of slavery, but we were not set free from all yokes. We took on the yoke of Christ, which is light (Matt. 11:30). The Holy Spirit is given to believers to convict us of sin and to enable us to live the Christian life; however, when we fail, our sins have already been forgiven because of Christ. However, as Paul wrote, we should not use our liberty to fulfill the desires of our flesh.

Galatians 5:16-26

¹⁶But I say to you, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. ¹⁹Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become boastful, challenging and envying one another.

Evidence of Salvation or Fruit of the Flesh?

Romans 1:24-32
1 Corinthians 6:9, 10
1 John

Aaron Ferguson
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Examine Your Fruit

Is It of the Spirit or the Flesh?

Leading Idea

The Spirit and the flesh are at odds; their influence is evident by the fruit in our lives.

Thus far, in his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul has contrasted the superiority of the New Covenant (freedom in Christ) with the Old Covenant (slavery under the Law), primarily because the Judaizers had convinced the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised in order to complete their conversion to Christianity. By requiring this additional step for salvation, these false teachers were preaching works and not Christ alone for the removal of sin. Paul now turned to the evidence, in the lives of both parties, to make his case, for, as Jesus said, “You shall know them by their fruit.”

The overarching principle at work in this passage is that the flesh and the Spirit are at odds (v.17) and, most of the time, it can be determined whether or not someone has surrendered to Christ by the deeds evident in his life. By the term “flesh,” Paul is referring to the sinful nature with which man is born and which manifests itself in his sinful, selfish passions, desires, thoughts, actions, attitudes, and words; someone who is still under the Law (v.18), or relying upon works to redeem him, is under the influence of the flesh and will, therefore, exhibit signs of such influence. On the other hand, the Spirit, of course, refers to the Holy Spirit, who indwells a believer upon his surrendering to Christ alone for salvation; the Spirit immediately begins to influence our thoughts, attitudes, actions, and words, aligning them to the desires of Christ.

Since the flesh and the Spirit are both present in the lives of believers, these forces wage a war in us and, thus, living a life that honors the Lord is a constant struggle for Christians (*Romans 7:14-25*). Though our hearts have been made new by Christ, we are justified before God because of Him, and we are now filled with His Spirit, this new life is trapped inside our sinful bodies (flesh), like a new tree in its old bark, and, thus, both forces can influence us at any time. Therefore, Paul challenged the Galatians to “walk by the Spirit” (v.16), to learn to submit to His leadership, so that they will “not carry out the desires of the flesh.” In other words, it is impossible for us to be preoccupied with both the Spirit and the flesh; since they are at odds, we can give precedence to only one at a time. Thus, “to walk by the Spirit” requires us to surrender to His leadership and make ourselves more available to live under His influence. It is not that we get more of Him but that we surrender more to Him.

Next, Paul provided a list of fruit (v.19-23, 26) that helps us to identify the source that influences us most; it is also a way to help identify who has or has not given his life to Christ. Paul wrote that the “deeds of the flesh are evident”; however, it is important to note that these deeds can be present in the life of a Christian, but they will not be his practice. Likewise, a non-believer can exhibit qualities from the list of spiritual fruit. These things are just clues to help us identify the source of one’s deeds. A person who practices sexual immorality, for example, without any remorse or conviction of sin, is, more than likely, not a Christian. The Spirit of God is not in him. Keep in mind that a person who practices any of the things on the first list can certainly be saved, but those who regularly practice such things give evidence that they are not.

Paul closes this passage by explaining what has happened in the life of believers. They have “crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (v.24; 2:20), meaning that the flesh is no longer master over us, for Christ conquered it for us on the cross, and we are no longer its slave. If we are indeed redeemed through Christ and are indwelled by His Spirit, then, by all means, let us live in such a way as to give evidence of such a transformation. “If we live by the Spirit, then, let us also walk by the Spirit” (v.25). Let it be obvious for others to see that, yes, we are children of God. Let there be no doubt, when others watch us or listen to us, that we are under the influence of the Holy Spirit and are genuinely seeking to live a life worthy of the One who saved us. Let us not send mixed messages that cause others to wonder about our salvation, but rather let them be assured of it by the fruit in our lives.

Galatians 6:1-10

¹Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to himself, so that you too will not be tempted. ²Bear one another's burdens and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. ³For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. ⁵For each one will bear his own load. ⁶The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him. ⁷Do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. ⁸For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but, the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time, we will reap if we do not grow weary. ¹⁰So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

The Law of Christ

Loving Others as Yourself

Leading Idea

We fulfill the Law of Christ by loving others as ourselves.

In the previous passage (5:16-26), Paul contrasted the results of one's living life under the influence of the flesh and the Spirit. He also pointed out that those who live by the Spirit (meaning those that are Christians) are no longer bound by the Law of Moses (v.18). Christ, in His sinless life, fulfilled all of the requirements of the Law for us and, then, removed the penalty of breaking the Law (death) when He died on the cross. As His followers, we are not obligated to keep the Law of Moses, but rather we are obligated to keep the Law of Christ (6:2). But, what is the Law of Christ? The Law of Christ, which Paul eluded to in Chapter 5, is the summary of the Law of Moses, that is to love the Lord with all your heart (*Mark 12:30, 31*) and to love your neighbor as yourself (5:14). In this passage (6:1-10), Paul provided practical ways for how to fulfill the Law of Christ.

First, we can help restore those who stumble (v.1). Though it is the natural tendency of our flesh to judge or condemn someone "caught in a trespass" (a sin, somewhere he should not be), the Law of Christ commands us to love him. Those who are "spiritual" (mature) will show grace and deal with this individual with gentleness, understanding that in another situation, the ones trapped may be us.

As a side to this restoration, Paul warned us against pride (v.3, 4). To be considered the spiritual one, bailing out those who are ensnared in trespasses, can boost our ego, but allowing this inflation is dangerous. We must never look at other people's problems and think for a second that we have it all together; we must never boast in the fact that we have our ducks in a row, "thinking that we are something." When we compare our lives to others, we are deceiving ourselves. We must not fall into that trap, but rather we must aim our judgmental sentencing at ourselves. If we boast about anything, let it not be how we stack up with others, but let us boast in how Christ has changed our lives.

Second, we can help bear someone else's burden (v.2). In context, Paul is referring to "the restoration" in the previous verse, but, in general, the term "burden" can include all sorts of scenarios. While we are expected to live responsibly and not be a burden to anyone else (v.5), there are times when we have too much on our plate, too much to carry alone. In other words, at times life deals us an unusual circumstance that is heavy and that causes a great deal of anxiety, frustration, stress, or fatigue (i.e. an illness, loss of job, death of a loved one, divorce, move, pregnancy, etc.). These are burdens, and to fulfill the Law of Love, we must be alert to know when and how we can be of help.

Third, we are to express our gratitude to those who have impacted our lives (v.6). In light of the restoration that has taken place (v.1), the one restored should thank the one who helped in the restoration. However, in the bigger picture, all of us are in the process of "restoration"; it is called sanctification. The Spirit conforms us to the image of Christ (*Romans 8:29*). In that process, God uses various people to "teach" us. The Law of Love compels us to express our appreciation to those who have helped us grow spiritually, either with material resources or the written or spoken word.

As another side, Paul pointed out that the one who is selfish and does things to fulfill his fleshly desires will reap corruption (v.7, 8), but the one who lives by the Spirit and does the things that please the Lord (fulfilling the Law of Christ) will reap life. This everlasting life may refer to the present but more than likely is referring to the future. We will be rewarded for fulfilling the Law of Christ.

Fourth, we are to do good things for all people (v.9, 10). Paul acknowledged the fact that our struggle between the flesh and spirit is difficult, but he challenged us not to lose heart. Our reward is coming. Let us be "do-gooders," especially in the church, to those who are of Christ, that we may be "a light to the world, who will see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven" (*Matt. 5:16*).

Galatians 6:11-18

¹¹See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

¹²Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh. ¹⁴But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. ¹⁵For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. ¹⁷From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus. ¹⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.

Dead to the World

Romans 6:2-10
Galatians 2:20
Philippians 3:20
1 John 5:4, 5

Boasting in Christ

Romans 8:1-3
1 Corinthians 2:2
1 Peter 2:24

A Good Showing

Where Does Your Loyalty Lie?

Leading Idea

We cannot make a good showing for both God and man. We must choose where our loyalties lie.

Although this passage signifies the closing of this letter, it is no less significant than the other parts. In fact, Paul captured the heart of his message in his final words. Some scholars even believe that he does so in large letters (v.11) to emphasize his final points. Other scholars believe that Paul had dictated this letter to an assistant up to this point, but here he began writing words himself; the large letters may indicate that Paul's eyesight was poor.

Paul reserved his harshest words towards the Judaizers for the end of his letter (v.12, 13). The true motive behind the teaching of the Judaizers (those who require circumcision for salvation) was only to make "a good showing," so that they could brag about how many people they had converted to their way. They would rather protect their public perception, make good impressions, keep up appearances, and avoid persecution than hold to right doctrine. Quite simply, the Judaizers symbolize those who would take the easy road over taking any heat or hassle for their faith.

Paul said that the only thing he wants to be guilty of boasting about is Christ, not his own doctrine or how many people he had converted (v.14). May we follow his lead and make much of Christ, for because of Him, the world has been crucified to us. May we celebrate the changes the Lord has made in our lives, the good fruit that we see because of His Spirit, and the blessings that we have experienced because of His love, His forgiveness, and His grace.

When Paul wrote that "the world has been crucified to me and I to the world" (v.14), he was saying that the things of this world no longer enslaved him; they were no longer his master. He has a new master, that of Christ Jesus, and with Him, he has a new set of desires and motives. As we grow in Christ, the attraction and temptations of this world should diminish in our lives; they should no longer have the pull on us as they once did. We should find ourselves dead to the world, no longer enslaved to its passions, because we find complete satisfaction in Christ. He is now our all in all.

Although Paul had said it many times in different ways, he finally ended the letter with a direct statement – "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision in anything" (v.15). Judaizers were missing the boat completely. The sign of true salvation, the evidence of true conversion, is not in the flesh, but in the heart. Paul said it is that we are a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17), with a new love, a new spirit, with new desires and direction in life. Those who live under this new rule, or governance of the Spirit (v.16), find peace (internally and externally) and mercy (rather than legalism and judgment). They are also made part of the true "Israel of God," meaning those who are of the promise of Abraham (3:29).

While Judaizers were afraid of persecution, Paul was not. He bore in his body the marks of his suffering for Christ (v.17). He was not complaining, rather he viewed his scars and wounds as evidence of his loyalty to Christ. He belonged to Him and his loyalty had been proven by his injuries. These words are challenging for me. What battle scars do I bear? Where is the evidence that I have suffered for the Lord? If I have none, does that mean that I have "made a good showing" for men or that I've been too worried about impressions or what people may think of me?

I love the way Paul ended his letter – "The grace of our Lord be with you." Even in his closing (v.18), Paul hit the nail on the head – salvation is not about following laws or achieving works, it's about the work of God, His grace in sending Christ to pay for our trespasses. We find freedom in grace, while we find bondage in law. Why would we not choose Jesus over Judaizers? Why would we not follow the Law of Love instead of the Law of Moses? Why would we not choose life over death? I choose Christ. I choose grace. I choose love. I choose life. Thank God for His free gift of salvation.